

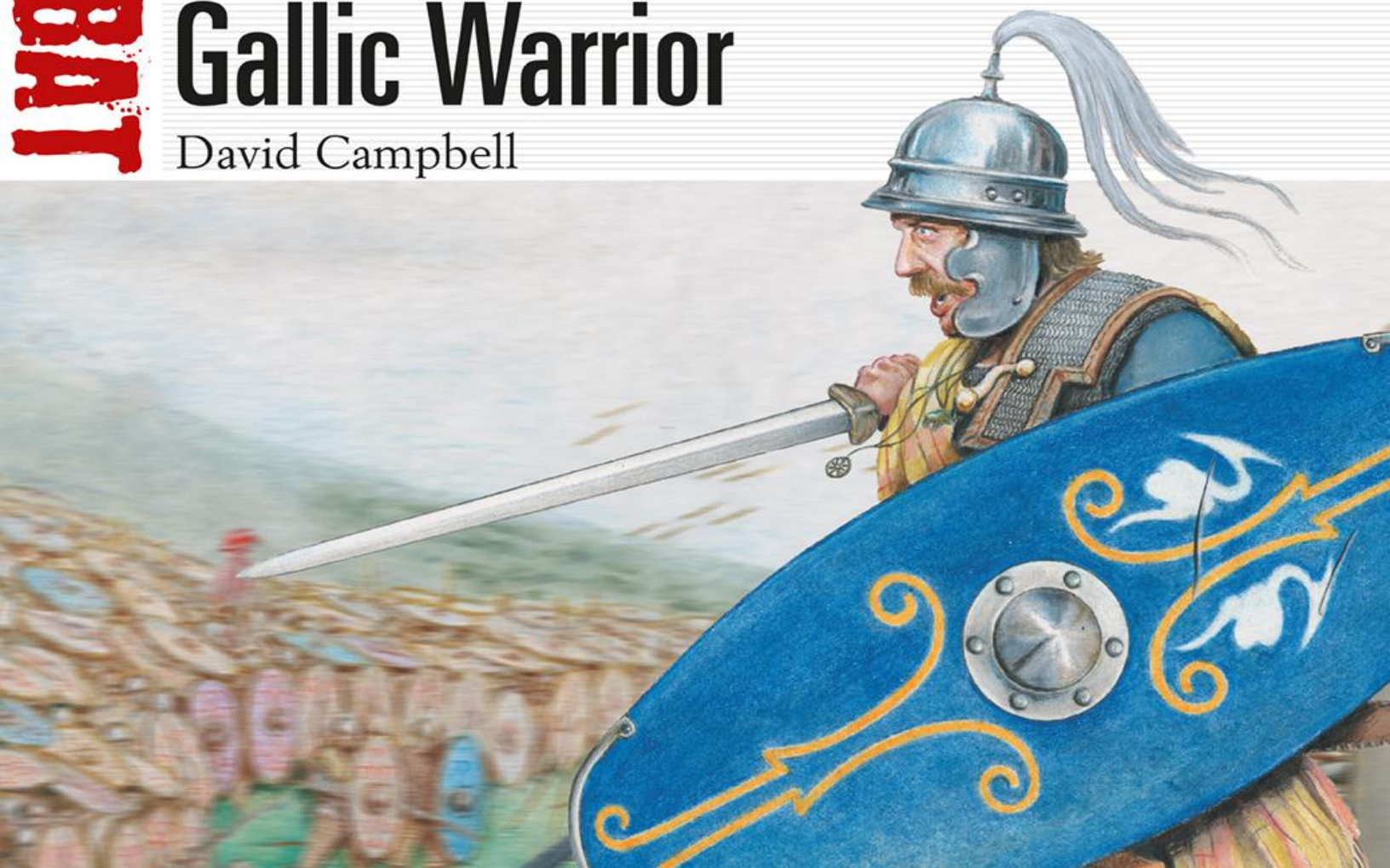


COMBAT

58–52 BC

Roman Legionary **VERSUS** Gallic Warrior

David Campbell



58–52 BC

COMBAT Roman Legionary
VERSUS
Gallic Warrior

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Illustrated by Raffaele Ruggeri

Dedication

To Stewart and Stephanie, trapped across the sea.

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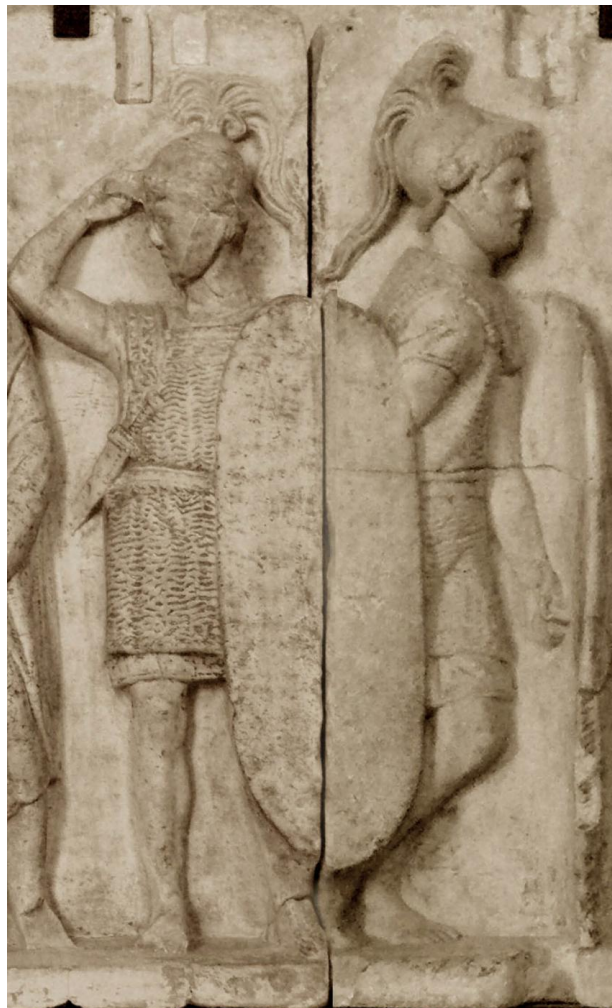
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Introduction

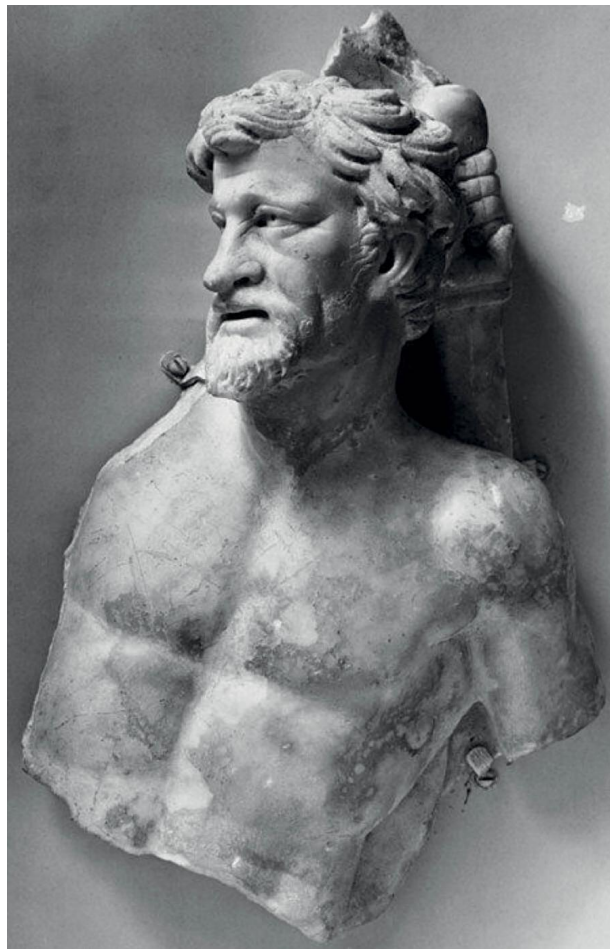
Julius Caesar's war against the Gauls (58–50 BC) saw the devastation of independent Gallic culture and the acquisition by the Roman Republic of a significant and lucrative region, its last major territorial expansion until the accession of Augustus in 27 BC. Despite Gaul's subsumption into the Roman world, the series of campaigns that had broken Gaul were not driven so much by actual Roman policy as they were by the personal ambitions of Caesar. Even by the standards of the late Roman Republic he seems to have been unusually driven by a desire for status and glory that would outshine all his rivals – entirely acceptable pursuits for a Roman aristocrat, but ends that could only be achieved by remarkably aggressive means. One of the more commonly accepted routes to fame and fortune was an appointment as a proconsul – in effect a year-long governorship of a Roman province. Caesar, having secured for himself the proconsulship of Gallia Cisalpina and Illyricum for a highly unusual five years, was ready to take full advantage of his new role. A proconsul would need at least a nominal reason to move beyond the borders of his province, but in Caesar's case the fractious and unstable nature of the relationships between Gallic tribes (both those allied with and hostile to Rome) could be relied on to provide an inciting incident. In March 58 BC, a westward migration by the Helvetii provoked conflict with the Aedui, the latter a tribe allied to Rome. The nature of the relationships between the Romans and their allies in Gallia Transalpina and southern Gaul was not such that the tribes could necessarily rely on Roman military intervention if they were threatened, but it did entitle them to plead their case with a reasonable expectation of at least diplomatic assistance.

Caesar, with his control of Illyricum and with three legions at his command, originally may well have envisaged a campaign along the Danubius (Danube), using his eastern province as a base from which to strike into Dacia, but fate intervened – Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, proconsul in Gallia Transalpina, died before even being able to take up his new post. Caesar's political connections buttressed by enormous bribes ensured that the newly vacant provincial seat was added to his roster, as was another legion, making for a powerful regional army. With a rich and populous unconquered land now on his doorstep and four experienced legions at his

command, Caesar's eye turned away from the east and moved north to Gaul. The opportunity presented by the migration of the Helvetii, mere weeks after Caesar took up his proconsulships, was not to be missed. Hemmed in by mountains and poor opportunities for raiding and war, the tribe wished to move towards the Atlantic coast, initially trying to cut through part of Gallia Transalpina, but Caesar had refused them passage. The Helvetii were forced to move deeper into central Gaul, their new path causing the Aedui to plead for Roman help. This was an invitation that Caesar expected and which he took up with vigour, crossing into Gaul and marching on the Helvetians, bringing them to battle at Bibracte in the summer of 58 BC. For an ambitious and talented politician who quickly proved himself to be a capable and strategically adept general, the success against the Helvetii would prove to be only the beginning.



A pair of legionaries from the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus in Rome. In his biography of Caesar, Plutarch recounts the reason for his army's loyalty to him: 'Such spirit and ambition Caesar himself created and cultivated in his men, in the first place, because he showed, by his unsparing bestowal of rewards and honours, that he was not amassing wealth from his wars for his own luxury or for any life of ease, but that he treasured it up carefully as a common prize for deeds of valour, and had no greater share in the wealth than he offered to the deserving among his soldiers; and in the second place, by willingly undergoing every danger and refusing no toil. Now, at his love of danger his men were not astonished, knowing his ambition; but that he should undergo toils beyond his body's apparent powers of endurance amazed them' (Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 17.1). (Jastrow/Wikimedia/Public Domain)



A fragment of a Roman marble sarcophagus dating from c.AD 160–180 and showing the head and torso of a Gallic warrior. As might be expected in a tribal society, the bulk of Gallic men were not professional soldiers; that was a role retained by the lords and their entourages. Nevertheless, the warrior ethos that permeated Gallic society meant that simple farmers and craftsmen would also know how to carry a spear, sword and shield, and be expected to use them. (metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0 1.0)

For their part the Gauls were disparate bands of Celtic peoples bound by a common culture that had developed into a reasonably advanced network of

social and political societies, with many Gauls living in *oppida* (settlements) often of a considerable size; even so theirs was still a tribal civilization riven with feuds and factionalism, both between and within individual tribes. Though they had abolished kingship most Gauls still lived in extremely hierarchical communities that defined themselves through martial endeavour. The warrior ethos that had dominated the Gallic view of the world for many generations was still its defining characteristic, despite the fact that it existed in awkward juxtaposition with increasingly complex representative political systems (such as popular assemblies and annually elected magistracies), and the growing commercial opportunities from manufacturing and trade that were blossoming in the *oppida*. Wars between tribes were common, and although alliances between tribal groups were possible they often revolved around short-term mutual benefits rather than anything more substantial.

Gaul, 58 BC

By the time that Julius Caesar took up his proconsulship in 58 BC, Rome, though still a republic governed by the Senate, had been the most significant power in the Mediterranean world for well over a century. There was no formal policy of colonization, nor was there yet a conscious attempt to create an 'Imperial' realm, but the natural aggression of the Roman state married to the avariciousness and overweening ambition of Rome's leading sons had seen most of the neighbouring lands fall under Roman sway since victory in the Second Punic War (218–201 BC). Caesar was a product of a political world in which influence derived chiefly from economic power, which in its turn was most easily secured through the lucrative governorship of provinces, often sustained by military campaigns to pacify rebellious subjects or bring order to bordering lands. With Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Transalpina under his control, Caesar had responsibility for two of Rome's most significant provinces, as well as the management of relations with allied and independent Gallic tribes both within and beyond his borders. Gaul, a rich and fertile territory occupied by an often fractious and internecine collection of tribal groups, was a land ripe with opportunity. It

was more settled than Germania, and was heavily populated by a multitude of independently minded tribal groups that nevertheless mostly shared a common Gallic culture. There were many *oppida* (sing. *oppidum*, the Latin word for a settlement), essentially fortified towns and cities that represented the centres of local tribal life that also served as hubs of production, commerce and trade. Although the Romans generally saw the Gauls as wild, impulsive and borderline barbaric, Gallic culture was well-developed and deeply rooted, with particular strengths in areas such as metalworking that pre-dated and at times exceeded Roman capabilities. For a man like Caesar, ambitious, capable, deeply in debt and with four legions at his disposal, the potential prizes that might result from a campaign nominally in support of Rome's local tribal allies could be career-defining.

The tribal leaders north of the Roman provincial border were certainly all used to war and well understood the military power that Caesar could command, but – at least initially – they failed to appreciate the scope of his ambition, and what it would mean for their way of life. By the time that Vercingetorix, leader of the Arverni, united enough tribes to present Caesar with an existential threat, Gaul had already endured five years of depredation and bloodshed on a scale rarely seen in the ancient world. *Oppida* had been besieged and destroyed, the adult male populations of whole tribes were massacred on the battlefield, in the aftermath of significant defeats those that remained were dragged away into slavery, crops were despoiled and a way of life for several million people was utterly overthrown. The senator, consul and engineer Sextus Julius Frontinus, writing towards the end of the 1st century ad, observed that Caesar claimed that he sought to conquer ‘the foe by hunger rather than by steel’ (Frontinus, *Strategemata* 4.7.1); the statement had some truth to it, but couldn't come close to capturing the depths of what it meant to be Caesar's enemy.



The Opposing Sides

ORIGINS

Roman

The army that Caesar led into Gaul was one that had undergone a series of evolutions during the preceding century. The old manipular legions that had brought Hannibal to heel, made up of citizen-soldiers grouped and armed according to their age, status and experience (*velites* positioned as a loose screen ahead of the main force, *hastati* forming the first line, *principes* the second line and *triarii* the third line), had slowly been transformed into a more professional organization. The changes, usually bundled together under the umbrella term ‘Marian Reforms’, named after the Roman general Gaius Marius, victor of the Cimbrian War (113–101 BC) and the Jugurthine War (112–106 BC) and dated to 107 BC, would see an expansion of recruitment, the harmonization of the legionary’s role, the standardization of his arms and equipment, and the adoption of the cohort as the main tactical unit of the legion. Several of the changes had been under way before Marius formalized them, but his recognition of Rome’s need for a more consistent and professional military force helped to make the legions that would provide such effective service to Caesar 50 years later. The old distinctions between the four types of infantry would converge, with the role of the *velites* or light infantry falling out of the legion proper, its men being absorbed into the legion’s centuries and their erstwhile duties as *levis armatura* (skirmishers) now fulfilled by various auxiliaries (*auxilia*) drawn from allied contingents. The most important tactical change, however, was the move away from the manipular legion to the cohort as the main unit of manoeuvre and combat.



A detail from the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus, showing a pair of Roman legionaries and a cavalryman during the levy of the Army; the altar was made for the Temple of Neptune on the Field of Mars sometime towards the end of the 2nd century BC. The representations on the altar are a rare contemporary example of the dress and equipment of the Roman Army during the late Republican period; the helmets sport horsehair crests, though the Celtic-influenced 'La Tène D' pattern worn by the cavalryman is slightly different to the Attic style of the legionaries; the oval shields each have reinforcing central spines and pronounced bosses, and both infantrymen wear *loricae hamatae* (coats of mail) with shoulder doubling to give added protection. The existing evidence suggests that Caesar's legionaries were armed and equipped in much the same way as those shown here. (Jastrow/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

The maniple was originally 120 men strong, Polybius (writing around 150 BC) observing that three maniples gathered together were termed a cohort, though the historian David Potter notes that it was more likely, given the fact that units for the auxiliary legions were raised by locality, that a cohort initially meant a unit from one location that (probably) contained maniples of all four troop types (Potter 2010: 311). In practical terms the expansion of recruitment and the increasing role of state arsenals in the arming and equipping of all legionaries that was probably well under way by the turn of the 1st century BC led to a gradual elimination of distinctions between the *hastati*, *principes* and *triarii*. The historian Lawrence Keppie notes that each cohort in the 'new' legion was made up from a maniple drawn from each of the three old lines of *hastati*, *principes* and *triarii*, together with the associated *velites* (Keppie 1984: 64). The cohort was thus a microcosm of the old legionary organization rather than a random grouping of three

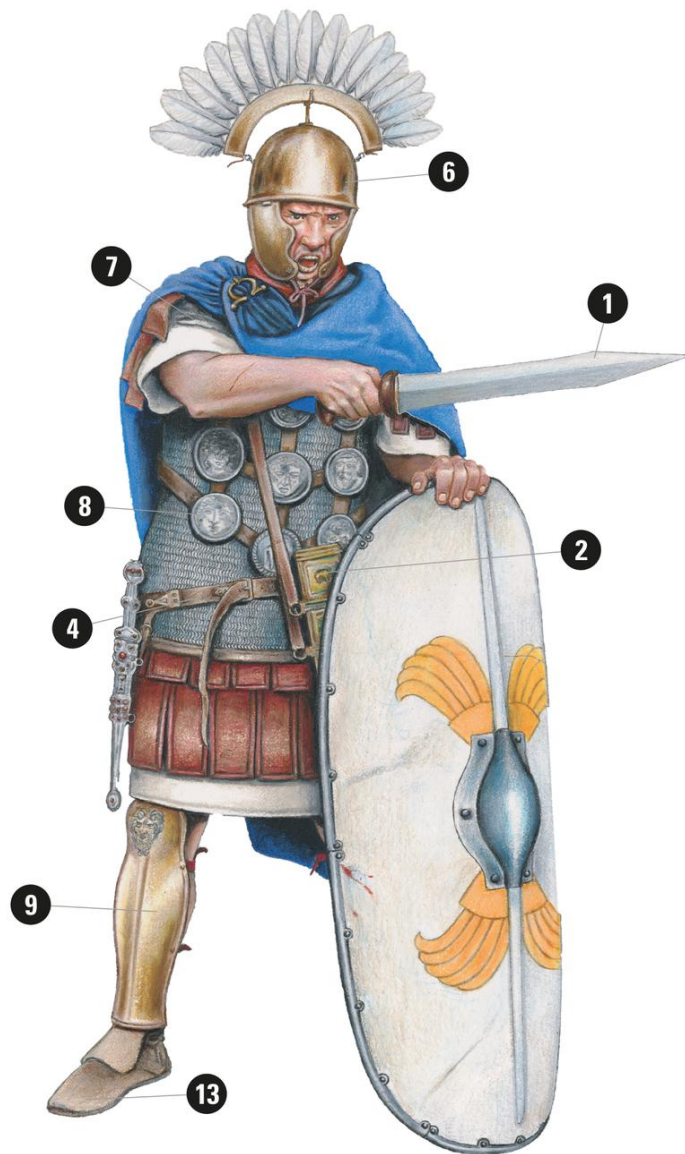
adjacent maniples in one of the old lines. The First Cohort of the new legion consisted of the three maniples which had stood at the extreme right of the old lines; the Second Cohort was made up of the next three maniples in order of seniority, and so on; the Tenth Cohort consisted of the maniples which had stood at the left ends of the three lines of *hastati*, *principes* and *triarii*. The distinction between the old ‘maniples’ within a cohort may have lasted some time, but probably more as a cultural memory than as an operational reality. A legion was 4,800 men strong and was composed of ten cohorts, each of 480 men; a cohort in turn was made up of six centuries (now 80 men each), each of which was made up of ten *contubernia* (a *contubernium* being the tent that sheltered each eight-man squad). The *contubernium* was not a tactical unit, but as the men lived and fought together it did foster loyalty and a sense of cohesion that could prove critical in battle.

Cavalry and light infantry were not integral components of the legion by this period. The Roman horsemen that accompanied the legions in the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), despite being drawn from the top tier of society, were rarely a battle-winning force, and gradually fell from view in subsequent decades. Roman military culture was highly adaptable, especially when it encountered superior weapons and equipment, adopting those of Rome’s enemies on multiple occasions. A similar approach seems to have been taken with regard to cavalry and light infantry, and by Caesar’s time Roman and Latin forces were entirely absent in such roles, their places being taken by non-Italian allies (*alae*) (Keppie 1984: 79). Such units were often raised from native levies, drawn from tribal allies, or were contracted mercenaries, including the much-famed Balearic slingers and horsemen from Hispania, North Africa and the east. Caesar’s cavalry were drawn from a mix of his Gallic allies, Germanic hostages and various groups of mercenaries, some of which came from Hispania. His light troops varied over time, but included Numidian light infantry, Cretan archers and detachments of Gallic infantry (Goldsworthy 1998: 35).

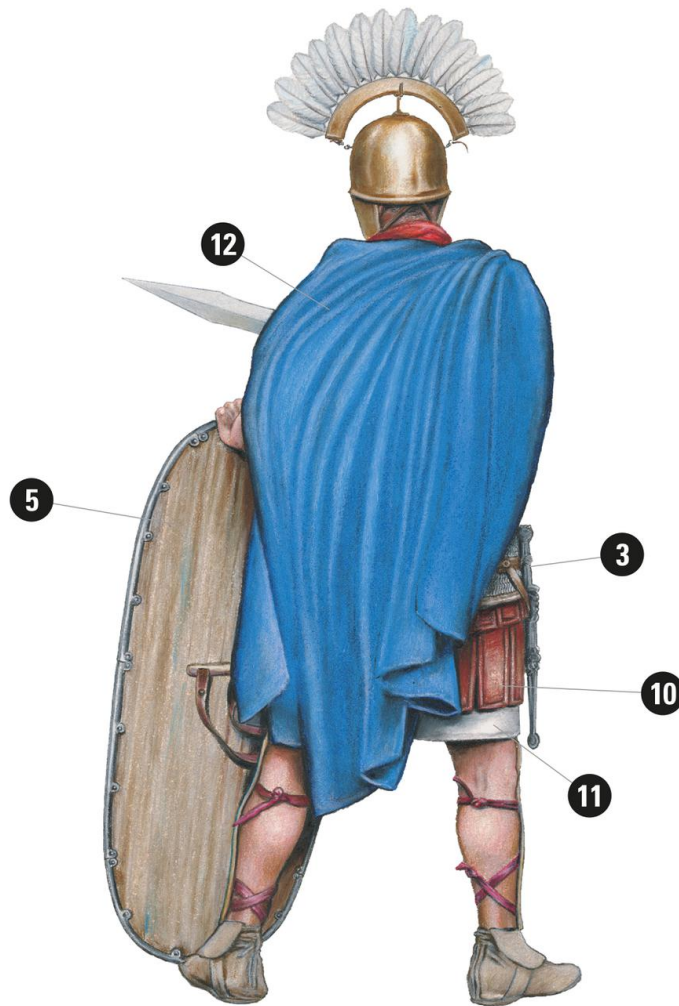
COMBAT

Roman centurion

Bibracte, 58 BC



The centurion is the veteran of over 20 years' worth of campaigns and battles, the numerous *phalerae* that he wears testament to his experience and valour. Despite his fine clothing and equipment, he is happy to be at the heart of the fight, signified by the dust, dirt and scrapes that he has accrued. He is in the act of shouting orders to his legionaries, stiffening their resolve in the face of yet another charge by a band of furious Gauls. He stands resolute, a *scutum* from a fallen legionary gripped in one hand and his *gladius* outstretched in the other, pointing towards the heart of the enemy line.



Weapons, dress and equipment

The centurion is armed with a *gladius* (sword; 1) suspended from a baldric (2) on his left hip and a *pugio* (dagger; 3) suspended from his relatively plain leather *cingulum* (belt; 4) on his right hip. His *gladius* is of the newer Mainz type, with an elegantly 'waisted' blade that was a little shorter than that of the *gladius Hispaniensis* style that had been in use since the Punic Wars and which was still common during the late Republic.

He carries a legionary's *scutum* (shield; **5**) that bears a design inspired by those found on the Triumphal Arch of Orange, erected sometime during the Augustan Principate (27 BC–AD 14). For protection he wears a bronze Coolus 'B pattern' helmet (**6**), likely common during the 1st century BC through to the early years of the Empire, decorated with a transverse crest of feathers; a *lorica hamata* (coat of mail; **7**) decorated with a harness of *phalerae* (**8**), awards that demonstrate his personal honour and glory (based on examples from the funerary stele of the centurion Quintus Sertorius Festus, 1st century AD); and a pair of well-worked bronze greaves (**9**). The use of greaves (singular or pairs) had fallen out of use among ordinary legionaries by the time of the Gallic Wars, but they were still (and would continue to be) worn by centurions, as much a mark of their rank as for any protection they offered.

Beneath his armour he wears a leather *subarmalis* (padded jacket; **10**) and a white linen tunic (**11**), his uniform completed by a *sagum*-style military cloak in pale blue (**12**) fixed with a bronze *fibula* (brooch) at his right shoulder and leather boots (**13**) based on those worn by the centurion Minucius Lorarius on his funerary stele, c.43–30 BC.

Gallic

In spite of an increasingly complex pattern of civic life that had been nurtured in part by the stability offered by the social and commercial life of the *oppida*, Gallic tribal society was class-based, with the richest and most powerful members enjoying the positions of leadership. Wealth and status were usually accrued through victory in battle, resulting in endemic warfare; the tribes of Gaul regularly fought one another, sometimes yearly, but their form of warfare was somewhat different to that which they would come to experience at Caesar's hands. It is unlikely that many of the campaigns that local chieftains launched against one another were designed to entirely overwhelm or destroy their opponents; rather subjugation was the probable aim – a more measured form of battle was fought, with the winners securing plunder and the defeated side reduced to the status of vassal tribe

(Goldsworthy 1998: 56). The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the 1st century BC, observed how 'It is also their custom, when they are formed for battle, to step out in front of the line and to challenge the most valiant men from among their opponents to single combat, brandishing their weapons in front of them to terrify their adversaries' (Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 5.29). The general relative stability of Gallic society, coupled with the habit of personal challenges and overt displays of valour described above, speak of a more ritualized and sustainable form of conflict than the rapacious and unforgiving form of warfare that the Romans would bring with them.

The Gauls themselves were striking figures, generally bigger and fiercer than their Roman opponents. Diodorus gave a rare description of the tribesmen, probably sourced from a first-hand account by the historian Posidonius:

The Gauls are tall of body, with rippling muscles, and white of skin, and their hair is blond, and not only naturally so, but they also make it their practice by artificial means to increase the distinguishing colour which nature has given it ... The clothing they wear is striking – shirts which have been dyed and embroidered in varied colours, and breeches, which they call in their tongue *bracae*; and they wear striped coats, fastened by a buckle on the shoulder, heavy for winter wear and light for summer, in which are set checks, close together and of varied hues ... The Gauls are terrifying in aspect and their voices are deep and altogether harsh; when they meet together they converse with few words and in riddles, hinting darkly at things for the most part and using one word when they mean another; and they like to talk in superlatives, to the end that they may extol themselves and depreciate all other men. They are also boasters and threateners and are fond of pompous language, and yet they have sharp wits and are not without cleverness at learning. (Diodorus, *BH* 5.28–31)



The Mšecké Žehrovice Head, a sculpture of a Celtic man, possibly a warrior, completed between 150 BC and 50 BC and discovered in a 1943 excavation, 65km from Prague. In modern terms Celtic civilization has been broadly defined by archaeological discoveries based on two key areas, namely the Halstatt culture (12th–5th centuries BC) found near Salzburg in Austria, and the La Tène culture (450–c.1 BC) found on the north side of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland; the latter is further subdivided into three periods (La Tène I, 450–250 BC; La Tène II, 250–150 BC; and La Tène III, 150–1 BC). (CeStu/Wikimedia/**CC BY 3.0**)



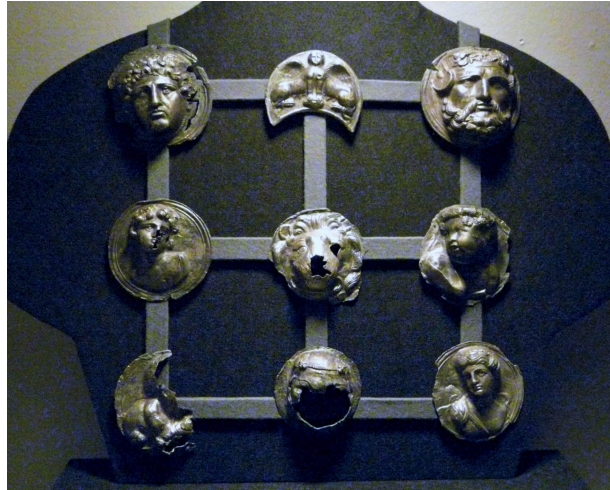
A glass-plaque fragment depicting a Gallic shield as a trophy as well as a male and female captive, 1st century AD. The fragment shows a draped figure with a sword slung diagonally across his waist; on his outstretched left arm he holds a large oval shield, from behind which protrudes a standard topped with a figure of an animal, perhaps a boar. Below and to the right

the upper half of a draped female figure stands facing three-quarters to the left. On the shield a central frontal *bucranium* (an ox-skull motif) set within a double circle and radiating spokes dominates, while two sets of two linked rings appear above and below.
(metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0 1.0)

RECRUITMENT AND MORALE

Roman

The increasing range of responsibilities that faced Rome's legions necessitated changes to recruitment and organization. During periods of emergency the Roman state had impressed new soldiers from those members of society who would not usually be eligible for military service – the *capite censi*, literally 'those counted by head' because their property was either negligible or entirely absent. Marius himself did not abolish the property qualification, but he did draw volunteers from the *capite censi*, arming and equipping them at the state's expense. The financial qualification for enlistment during the Second Punic War was 11,000 *asses*, when an *as* was one-tenth of a *denarius*. The need for manpower saw the qualification lowered throughout the 2nd century bc, falling in stages to 1,500 *asses* by 129 BC (by which time an *as* was one-sixteenth of a *denarius*), eventually being abolished likely on or just after Marius's reforms of 107 BC, allowing all elements of Roman civic society the chance to serve and thus enjoy the benefits that could accrue during a successful military career. The broadening of recruitment allowed Rome to man its legions, but many of the new recruits lacked the private financial means of their predecessors necessitating further administrative changes, namely the provision of clothing, equipment and weapons by the state. The legionary was still responsible for the upkeep of his weapons and equipment, and would enlist for a minimum of six years, which could be extended up to a maximum duration of 16 years' service.



The Lauersfort *phalerae* (so-called because they were discovered in Lauersfort, Germany). Thought to have originated with the Etruscans and been adopted by the Romans, a *phalera* was a sculpted disc with raised embellishments or engravings usually made from gold or silver that was presented as an award to a Roman unit in recognition of bravery or some other outstanding feat of arms, to be borne on its standard. Smaller versions of the awards were made in recognition of an individual soldier's achievements, approximating the symbolism and respect that today would come with a medal. *Phalerae* could depict a variety of scenes including gods, mythological figures and, later, emperors. Individuals who had received multiple *phalerae* could wear them attached to a harness of leather straps, allowing the bearer to display his prowess and renown to friends and enemies alike. (Hartmann Linge/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

A Roman citizen's sense of belonging within a legion was formalized by his oath, the *sacramentum militare*, by which he pledged his loyalty to the consul under whom he was to serve. Though the exact wording used by Republican legionaries is not known, the *sacramentum militare* required the men to swear by the gods to assemble when called to do so by their commander, to obey his commands, to obey military law, neither to desert nor disband until discharged, never to flee the battlefield, and never to abandon the battle line except to retrieve a weapon, strike an enemy or save a friend (Chrissanthos 2013: 321). The potency of such an oath should not be underestimated in a culture that celebrated personal honour so highly, but the *sacramentum militare* was not the only method of ensuring compliance and good conduct. There were significant inducements to keep the legionary in line, from the promise of plunder and a lump sum or a parcel of land at the end of his service to the chance of promotion (eventually to the rank of centurion), and awards such as the *corona vallaris* (a golden crown featuring *valli* (palisades), awarded for being the first man to enter an enemy camp) or

phalerae, torcs (neck rings) and *armillae* (bracelets) for outstanding acts of bravery or leadership in battle.

The other side of the coin was a system of harsh discipline that was designed to ensure ready compliance, the most well-known of which were the *fustuarium* (a cudgelling meted out to an individual soldier for a range of infractions) and the *decimatio* (the practice of executing one-tenth of a unit that had disgraced itself in battle), though the latter was a rare and usually infamous occurrence. Writing in the 1st century AD, Sextus Julius Frontinus records (*Strategemata* 4.1) 38 different punishments for a range of infractions that were used in late Republican armies. At first glance that would seem to reinforce the idea of the Roman Army as an overly draconian institution, but when compared to the ad hoc or informal approach to discipline found in other contemporary armies, another conclusion can be drawn: for the Romans, it was necessary to strictly regulate and enforce behaviour due to the high level of organization and structural complexity that was an integral aspect of the Roman war machine, particularly when operating under the stress of a campaign in hostile territory.

Gallic

A tribal lord could rely upon his retainers to form the core of his force, professional warriors with a deep personal loyalty to their master who would form the core of any army. The more retainers a lord could sustain, the greater his prestige. Caesar mentions one particular type of retainer he encountered – the *soldurii* – 600 of whom were in the service of the Gallic chieftain Adcantuannus:

they enjoy all the conveniences of life with those to whose friendship they have devoted themselves: if anything calamitous happen[s] to them, either they endure the same destiny together with them, or commit suicide: nor hitherto, in the memory of men, has there been found any one who, upon his being slain to whose friendship he had devoted himself, refused to die. (Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* 3.22)

There is no indication that such a practice was widespread, but it was not the only case of such unusual behaviour. Gallic culture was deeply infused with religious belief and ritual, perhaps more so than within the Roman world, and the intensity of some Gallic practices certainly caught the attention of classical authors. The supposed sacrifice of humans to help with a particular augury, the ritual suicide of warriors at a feast, the decapitation of defeated

enemies and the display of their heads from a horse's harness or a gatepost (attested to by modern archaeological finds), or the example of the *soldurii* given above, all created a sense of otherness that reinforced the Roman perception that the Gauls were cut from a rather different cloth.



A figure wearing a helmet decorated with an image of a boar, as depicted on the Gundestrup cauldron (so-called because it was discovered at Gundestrup in Denmark, though its style is Thracian and it likely originated in the middle Danube region), a richly decorated silver bowl embellished with a number of Celtic warriors and religious symbols and thought to date from the La Tène III period. The boar, notable for its back-bristles standing up on end, might be in homage to the boar-god Euffigneix from north-eastern France, though it could also be in relation to another such deity, the boar-goddess Arduinna, centred on the dark forests of the Ardennes. (Bloodofox/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

Outside of a lord's immediate retinue there were 'professional' warriors available, men from beyond the tribe who would sell their skill for a campaign, and it is reasonable to assume that such combatants grew more common as the war continued and the ties of Gallic tribal society were progressively loosened. Straightforward mercenary bands were also available to some chieftains, for example those in north-eastern Gaul, as well as recruits from the multitudinous Germanic tribes across the River Rhene

(Rhine). In addition dependants, clients and other freemen of the tribe could be called on to fill out the ranks, though their loyalty was always to their own lord over and above any larger force of which they might find themselves a part. Caesar described the process by which a Gallic chieftain ‘proclaims an armed council (this according to the custom of the Gauls is the commencement of war) at which, by a common law, all the youth were wont to assemble in arms; whoever of them comes last is killed in the sight of the whole assembly after being racked with every torture’ (Caesar, *CBG* 5.56). The network of alliances that many tribes maintained through bonds of family and marriage allowed them to bring others into their fold, sometimes significantly increasing the size of the force they were able to field (Goldsworthy 1998: 54–55). Subject tribes – those defeated in war and which now had to pay fealty to their erstwhile enemy – would also be expected to rise.

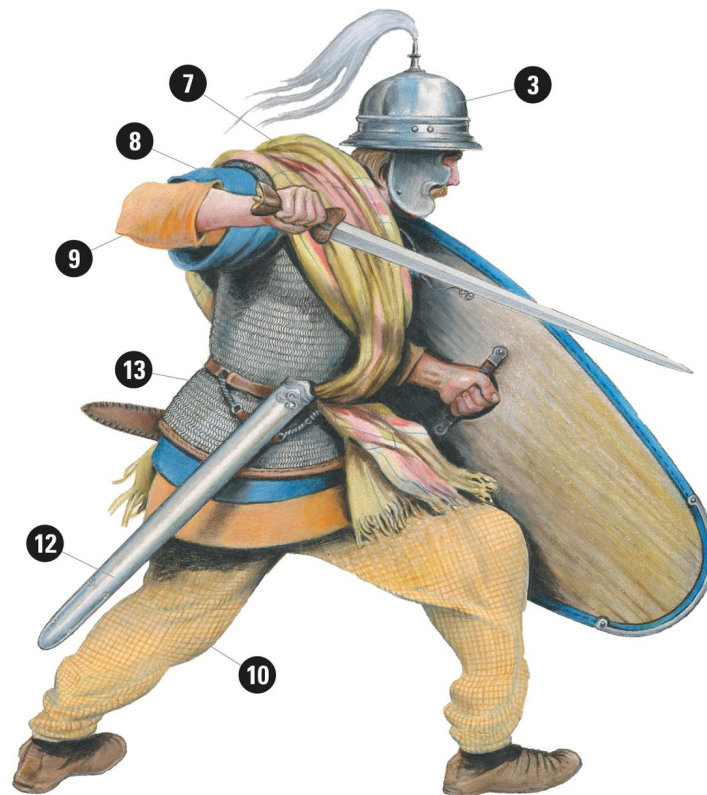
COMBAT

Gallic warrior

Bibracte, 58 BC



The Gaul is a man of some status, as evidenced by his fine arms and armour, not to mention the thick golden torc that he wears around his neck. He is charging forwards in a fury, intent on setting an example for his fellow tribesmen and hacking his way through the resolute wall of Roman legionaries in front of him. His battered shield shows evidence of the fact that this is not the first charge he has led this day. Like most Gallic warriors he would have also been armed with a spear (most likely as his primary weapon), but that has long since been lost in the maelstrom of the fight. Now he is coming at the Roman line again, driven on by his furious pride, his long bright blade ready to deliver a killing blow.



Weapons, dress and equipment

Having lost his spear earlier in the fight, the Gaul's main armament is his sword (1), a traditional weapon much feared for

its high quality and slashing blows. He also carries a fairly simple dagger on his left hip (2).

He is protected by a helmet of the Agen type (3) distinguished by flowing manes of white horsehair, a *lorica* (coat of mail) with shoulder doubling (4) that is for all practical purposes identical to that worn by his Roman enemies (who likely copied their own *loricae hamatae* from earlier Celtic influences), and a shield (5) modelled on one found at the site of Alesia, marked with a traditional Celtic design (based on a representation of captured Gallic shields found on the Triumphal Arch or Orange).

His golden torc is a sign of status, worn in addition to a wheel amulet (6) – a common symbol of the god Taranis – and a boar pendant. He also wears a cloak of finely woven patterned cloth (7), a padded vest (8) under his mail shirt – both to protect his tunic (9) and make the armour more comfortable – long trousers (10) and leather shoes (11). He carries his sword scabbard (a fine piece of iron workmanship) on his right hip (12), with both the sword and dagger attached to a traditional chain belt (13).

TRAINING, TACTICS AND WEAPONS

Roman

The gradual expansion of recruitment allowed for a much more resilient standing force (rarely fewer than 14 legions in the early decades of the 1st century BC), but the inclusion of men without a martial background or the military skills cultivated by those classes that were traditionally eligible for (and desirous of) service, required changes in training. New recruits underwent a short period of instruction known as *tirocinium* (apprenticeship), after which they blended into their legion's normal training regime. Exercise became a regular part of a legionary's life, as did practice with his individual weapons each morning; dummy swords, spears and shields, twice the weight of the actual equipment, would be used to increase endurance and build up strength. The Roman author Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, writing in the later years of the Empire, described the routine thus:



A modern reproduction of a Fulham-style *gladius*, the sort of sword that was starting to replace the *gladius Hispaniensis*, the mainstay of the legionaries' weapons from the time of the Punic Wars (264–146 BC), in the dying days of the Republic. The *gladius* was a first-rate weapon for both stabbing and slashing, but it was primarily intended to be used in conjunction with a shield, ideally in a formation with other similarly armed and equipped men. The Mainz and Fulham styles were very similar in appearance, both having subtly 'waisted' blades and prominent points, and both also had shorter blades than the *gladius Hispaniensis* (c.50–55cm as opposed to c.60–68cm for the earlier weapon). They were also lighter. The relative paucity of archaeological examples or iconographic representations from the late Republican period makes any attempt at giving firm dates for the adoption of one sword type over another fraught with difficulty. Most likely there was a (possibly decades-long) period of transition when several differing styles may have co-existed at the same time across the Roman world, possibly even within a single legion or cohort. (Søren Niedziella/Flickr/**CC BY 2.0**)

Let them be constantly employed either in field days or in the inspection of their arms ... They should be frequently called by roll and trained to be exact in the observance of every signal. Let them be exercised in the use of the bow, in throwing missile weapons and stones, both with the hand and sling, and with the wooden sword at the post; let all this be continually repeated and let them be often kept under arms till they are tired. Let them be exercised in running and leaping to facilitate the passing of ditches. And if their quarters are near the sea or a river, let them all, without exception, be obliged in the summer to have the frequent practice of swimming. Let them be accustomed to march through thickets, inclosures and broken grounds, to fell trees and cut out timber, to break ground and to defend a post against their comrades who are to endeavor to dispossess them; and in the encounter

each party should use their shields to dislodge and bear down their antagonists.
(Vegetius, *De rei militari* 3.4)

A Roman legion marched and deployed by cohort. When taking to the field of battle, the legion's ten cohorts would be organized into three lines (reminiscent of the *triplex acies* of mid-Republican armies), with four cohorts in the first line and three each in the second and third lines. The first cohort and the *aquila* (eagle) would usually be in the centre of the front line, with the best cohorts positioned on the legion's flanks; a cohort of 480 men would cover an area of 146m by 6.4m (Goldsworthy 1998: 138). The exact nature of each deployment would depend on the terrain, the legion commander's objectives, and the disposition of the enemy. Commanding a legion of ten cohorts was a much simpler affair than that of the mid-Republican legions with 30 maniples; cohorts themselves were well-organized with a clear hierarchy that made them responsive, a feature that probably relied on the fact that Caesar's legions had benefited from both professionalization and consistent training, something the legions of the three Punic Wars (264–146 BC) had lacked (Goldsworthy 1998: 34). Cohorts also allowed for faster manoeuvre and quicker concentration within large battles, as well as more flexibility in smaller actions. The allied or auxiliary infantry (*auxilia*, also called, from their traditional station on the wings of a roman army, *alarii*) were probably also organized in cohorts, and were generally employed as *levis armatura* (skirmishers), the nature of their role often determined by their particular weapons, such as archers and Balearic slingers. Reconnaissance was carried out by *exploratores* (patrols or parties of scouts), or by single *speculatores* (observers).



A modern reproduction of a Roman torsion-powered *catapulta* – the smallest of the various bolt-throwing (as opposed to stone-throwing *ballistae*) types – known as a *scorpio*. A pair of wooden bow arms was set into two vertical rope-springs (made of sinew and/or rope) mounted in a strong hardwood frame reinforced with iron plates. The rope-springs were twisted to force the bow arms forward, so that when a winch was used to draw the bow arms back a massive amount of energy was built up in the sinew (Wilkins 2003: 13). Caesar's *tormenta* ('torsion machines') were accurate and deadly, with a range of at least 400m (Wilkins 2003: 35) when mounted on his guard towers around Alesia.
(Charlieeleven/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

Battle tactics could involve diversionary attacks and outflanking manoeuvres, especially when the opposing armies were close to one another (as they often were for days at a time in Gaul), leading to unpleasant surprises like that experienced by Caesar at the battle of the Sabis in 57 BC. The Roman method of giving battle had not been radically changed by the Marian reforms, with the legion's main line relying on close cohesion and discipline to defend against the wild attacks that were characteristic of the Celtic peoples. Battle tactics were in large part defined by the weapons and equipment borne by a legionary – his *pilum* (javelin), *gladius* (sword) and *scutum* (shield). The *pilum* could be used as a thrusting weapon in a pinch, but its proper role was as a short-range missile weapon, one that could easily penetrate an enemy's shield and render it unusable, perhaps wounding or killing its bearer as well. There is no firm agreement on how many *pila* a

Roman legionary carried; while it might be reasonable to carry a pair of them when on the march, in battle it would be awkward and possibly unbalancing to try to hold a spare *pilum* in one's shield hand while throwing another. The *gladius* and *scutum* were designed to be used in conjunction with one another as part of a line, where the individual legionary's right flank would be protected by the *scutum* of the man next to him. In the attack the cohort's *pila* would be thrown at short range (10–20m) to disorganize, perhaps even break up an enemy formation, before the line would advance, shoulder to shoulder behind a wall of *scuta*, using their *gladii* to try to cut through the Gauls. As many of the encounters described by Caesar lasted for hours at a time it seems unlikely that such intense engagements were resolved by a single attack; rather the two sides might come together in a vicious clash for a number of minutes until mutually exhausted, retreat to a safe distance to recuperate, before advancing on one another again, until one side gave way (Sabin 2000: 1–17).



A later-style Montefortino helmet discovered in Bonn, Germany. The Montefortino was used by the Celts prior to its adoption by the Romans in the 3rd century BC. This example sports a prominent flat neck-guard, one of the features that was starting to become common on late Republican Roman helmets. Additional influences were absorbed during the Roman battles with the Gauls, eventually leading to the evolution of the famous Roman 'Gallic' patterns of helmet that would become one of the defining features of the Imperial-period army. (Hadley Paul Garland/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 2.0**)

Laying siege to a city or fortress was an integral aspect of ancient warfare, and one which would play a significant part in some of Caesar's most important campaigns in Gaul. Despite lacking the transient glamour of a battle on open ground, the ability to lay or break a siege was crucial for an army's ability to operate effectively, and Gaul, heavily populated with a large number of *oppida*, would draw both sides into such lengthy and costly encounters. The Romans, possessed of an army with a highly competent and well-practised set of engineers, employed a methodical approach. A camp would first be erected from which the assault could be launched. Caesar was not fond of skirmishes, and would either launch an opportunistic attack to test the enemy's defences, or begin investment straight away. The act of contravallation – entirely surrounding the *oppidum* or fortress with a series of entrenchments and walls, studded with watchtowers and supported by secondary encampments – was a statement of intent so clear that the works themselves were sometimes enough to prompt the defenders to surrender, as at Vellaunodunum in 52 BC (Levithan 2013: 125–26). Once the outer works were complete the besieged, assuming they lacked the wherewithal to break out, could be starved into submission, or the construction of further works, such as an *agger* (earth mound) or *turris* (siege tower) could be undertaken in anticipation of a final assault. Furthermore the men of the legions, well-accustomed to building encampments and fortifications on an almost daily basis, had the experience and the skill to realize the ambitions of their engineers in a quick and efficient manner. Without external relief, those trapped faced a bleak choice: surrender on Caesar's terms, or face the bloody horror that usually accompanied the final assault.



A magnificent example of an anthropomorphic Celtic sword, c.60 BC, that is also one of the best preserved. The beautifully modelled head that terminates the hilt is one of the finest surviving images of a Celtic warrior. The human form of the hilt – appearing as a geometric reduction of a classical warrior – must have been intended to enhance the power of the owner and to bear a talismanic significance. The warrior's face is emphatically articulated with large almond eyes, and the head with omega-shaped and finely drawn hair. Such weapons were far more common in earlier times, with the anthropomorphic adornments to hilts and crosspieces usually being much less detailed when they were employed in the La Tène III period. This sword, with an iron blade and copper-alloy hilt and scabbard, is a good example of the skill that the Gauls could bring to the manufacture of their weapons. ([metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0](https://www.metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0)
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Gallic

A certain degree of knowledge as to Gallic tactics can be inferred from the individual warrior's weapons, and how he was likely to use them. The wealthiest and most prominent of the Gallic warriors, usually the personal retainers of their chieftain, would be mounted and equipped with finely

worked weapons and armour, usually including a *lorica* (coat of mail) similar in fashion to that worn by the Romans (having likely been adopted by earlier legions after their wars with Celtic tribes in the mid-Republican period). The majority of a Gallic tribe's men would, however, have been foot soldiers; some of them would also wear mail of varying quality, but many would have to rely on the protection offered by their thick woollen cloaks. Diodorus describes their appearance:

For armour they use long shields, as high as a man, which are wrought in a manner peculiar to them, some of them even having the figures of animals embossed on them in bronze, and these are skilfully worked with an eye not only to beauty but also to protection. On their heads they put bronze helmets which have large embossed figures standing out from them and give an appearance of great size to those who wear them; for in some cases horns are attached to the helmet so as to form a single piece, in other cases images of the fore-parts of birds or four-footed animals. (Diodorus, *BH* 5.30)

Every man would have a shield and most likely a helmet, and be armed with a spear as his primary weapon and a sword as his secondary weapon. Though the Gauls were famous for their swords, the likely reality was that the levies that made up any large army would be filled out with many men who could not afford blades of high quality, or indeed any sword at all; spears would have been the simplest weapon to obtain and with which to fight. Gallic spears, though they could be thrown, would have been used primarily for thrusting, while their swords – long, sharp, and usually with a rounded tip – were for slashing rather than stabbing, a weapon designed to have the most impact in a *mêlée*:



A selection of re-enactors' Gallic helmets, including common decoration such as embellished cheek-plates, helmet rims, horsehair plumes and a bronze boar; such symbols would obviously have been for warriors of some status. The simplest of Gallic soldiers might lack a mail shirt but they would almost certainly have a well-made helmet and shield, less elaborate than those of their betters but just as effective. (De Agostini/C. BALOSSINI/Getty Images)

In place of the short sword they carry long broad-swords which are hung on chains of iron or bronze and are worn along the right flank. And some of them gather up their shirts with belts plated with gold or silver. The spears they brandish, which they call *lanciae*, have iron heads a cubit [0.5m] in length and even more, and a little under two palms in breadth. (Diodorus, *BH* 5.30)

Light infantry were also part of Gallic armies, though in relatively small numbers. They were armed with missile weapons such as javelins, slings and bows, and were used in support of infantry and especially cavalry charges.

Gallic horsemen, drawn from the richest sections of Gallic society, were as capable and as well-equipped as mounted warriors anywhere, sporting decorated helmets, fine coats of mail and decorated shields, their weapons consisting of lances or javelins and swords. Their four-horned saddles (later copied by the Romans) gave them a secure seat that allowed for displays of skilled horsemanship, and as individual warriors they could be fearsome and deadly. A Gallic cavalry force was more a collection of individuals than an organized unit; the riders usually had very high morale which was expressed

in their main tactic, a headlong charge, but their undisciplined nature made them difficult to control or rally after the initial engagement (Goldsworthy 1998: 58). Other cavalry roles such as scouting and screening were not undertaken with any great success, possibly because they were by their very nature unglamorous.



An image of the Vachères 'Gallic Warrior' statue, discovered in 1892 at Vachères in south-eastern France. Leaning on a large oval (or possibly hexagonal) shield and wearing a *lorica* (coat of mail) with shoulder doubling, he could be mistaken for a Roman soldier, but the torc, his appearance, clothing and sword indicate a Gaul. The statue has been provisionally dated to the Augustan Principate (27 BC–AD 14), so this well-armed and -attired Gaul, who would not be out of place standing next to his chieftain in battle against Caesar, is more likely to be an auxiliary, now in the service of Rome. (Daniele Giannotti/Flickr/[CC BY 2.0](#))

Battle tactics were straightforward, as they had to be in armies composed of multiple bands with varying levels of skill and experience, but the ability of Gallic forces to form versions of the *testudo* ('tortoise') battle formation of overlapping shields on a number of occasions suggests that they could act

in a coherent and disciplined manner if the occasion demanded it. Infantry were usually fielded in dense formations based around familial and tribal links – something that ensured each warrior would be under the eyes of those whose respect he wished to retain or win. As they approached the Roman line the Gauls would make themselves as intimidating as possible, the blaring of their *carnyxes* (elongated S-shaped trumpets) mixing with the roars and war cries of the men and the clatter of spears and swords against the iron rims of their shields (Goldsworthy 1998: 59). Missile weapons, mostly arrows and slingshot, would be used to try to soften the Roman line, before the final charge was driven home.

Caesar gives an account of the Gallic approach to laying siege, referring to the rapid investment of the *oppidum* of Bibrax by the Belgae:

The Belgae turned direct from their march to attack this town with great violence. The defence was with difficulty maintained on that day. The Gauls and the Belgae use one method of attack. A host of men is set all round the ramparts, and when a rain of stones from all sides upon the wall has begun, and the wall is stripped of defenders, the attackers form a ‘tortoise’, move up to the gates, and undercut the wall. This was easily done on the present occasion for when so vast a host hurled stones and missiles, no man might stand firm on the wall. (Caesar, *CBG* 2.6)

Though nearly successful, the impetuosity of the attack, without any attempt to establish entrenchments or defences, was easily broken by a relief force sent by Caesar the following day.



A *cornicen* depicted on Trajan's Column in Rome, c.AD 107–113. The *cornicen* was so-called because he played the *cornu*, a heavily curled brass horn which was used to issue orders to legionaries in battle. The *cornicen* was usually a legionary on double pay who would march at the head of his century together with the *signifer* (standard-bearer) and *tesserarius* (watch commander). (Gaius Cornelius/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

COMMUNICATIONS AND LEADERSHIP

Roman

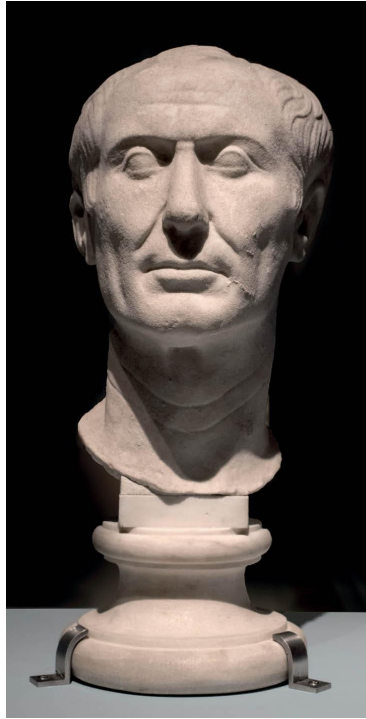
The eagle had become the formal symbol of Roman military power by 104 BC, as observed by Pliny the Elder:

Caius Marius, in his second consulship, assigned the eagle exclusively to the Roman legions. Before that period it had only held the first rank, there being four others as well, the wolf, the minotaur, the horse, and the wild boar, each of which preceded a single division. Some few years before his time it had begun to be the custom to carry the eagle only into battle, the other standards being left behind in camp; Marius, however, abolished the rest of them entirely. Since then, it has been remarked that hardly ever has a Roman legion encamped for the winter, without a pair of eagles making their appearance at the spot. (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 10.5.16)

The eagle became the centrepiece of the legion on the march and in battle, and its loss was a considerable disgrace. A legion's eagle was borne by an

aquilifer, with each individual century also having a *signum* (standard) that was carried by a *signifer*. Both the *aquila* and *signum* were used as markers and rallying points. Orders from centurions to their cohorts and centuries were often verbal, but there were sets of prepared instructions that were signalled by means of the *cornu* (a heavily curled G-shaped brass horn) blown by a *cornicen* or the *buccina* (a C-shaped brass horn) blown by a *buccinator*; such instruments signalled the regular events of camp life, as well as specific orders during a battle.

For his first campaign against the Helvetians Caesar's six legions (increased from his allotted four by the addition of two new legions raised from his new provinces by Caesar himself) were commanded by five legates and a *quaestor* (all chosen by Caesar personally), each legion having a staff of six tribunes and around 60 centurions: ten *pilus prior* ('front file') centurions commanding their own lead century and a cohort, with the remaining centuries each being led by a centurion and his *optio* (assistant). In the early and mid-Republican periods the centurions had been elected by their men, but by Caesar's time this practice had fallen away, with centurions now being professional officers that were clearly distinct from the rank and file, even if some of them had originally risen from those self-same humble beginnings. There were several routes to the post of centurion, including promotion from the ranks, though this was the slowest and rarest of all, requiring about 15 years of service and progression through a legion's clerical or junior officer posts. Another way of obtaining a position for men of equestrian rank was an appointment by the Senate, something that relied upon one's social status (Southern 2006: 130).



Believed to be one of only two contemporary renderings of Julius Caesar, this bust (dated to 50–40 BC) was discovered in 1825 and is known as the Tusculum portrait. Born in 100 BC, Caesar was drawn from the first rank of Roman patrician families, a wealthy, well-educated and ambitious man. Though he was a skilled political operator he was not known for his generalship; apart from a relatively easy ride as pro-praetorian governor in Hispania Ulterior ('Further Iberia'), he lacked any significant campaigning experience before he embarked on his war against the Gauls. It is almost impossible to separate Caesar from his own account of the Gallic War – a literal case of history being written by the winner – but even taking such obvious bias into account his strategic aggression and tactical acumen still come through. Examples of his personal valour occur more than once, notably during the most desperate hours while fending off the encroaching Nervii at the battle of the Sabis in 57 BC, as well as the final counter-attack at Alesia, actions that almost certainly played a major part in winning both battles. (Ángel M. Felicísimo/Wikimedia/[CC BY 2.0](#))

Gallic

The communications used by Gallic armies seem to have been rudimentary, with instruments such as the *carnyx* primarily used as a tool to boost morale rather than for anything more complex. Diodorus describes them thus: 'Their trumpets are of peculiar nature and such as barbarians use, for when they are blown upon they give forth a harsh sound, appropriate to the tumult of war' (Diodorus, *BH* 5.30). This accords with the level of tactical sophistication that most Gallic armies could muster; the nature of their approach to combat relied on simplicity, in large part because theirs were not trained forces capable of obeying complex commands on the field of battle. It is probable

that ranks of horns would have been used to signal the launch of an attack, thereafter simply offering encouragement to the fighters.



A 1st-century BC *carnyx* found in the Gallic sanctuary of Tintignac in the Corrèze region of southern France in 2004. The *carnyx* was a regular feature of Celtic (and Gallic) armies from at least 200 BC until well into the Imperial period. (Claude Valette/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)



A view of the (rather romanticized) 7m-tall monument to Vercingetorix erected in 1865 by Napoleon III at Alesia in an attempt to invest his own regime with some historical glamour. Unlike Caesar, relatively little is known about Vercingetorix – even the epithet we know him by is Gallic for ‘great warrior king’, a title more than a personal name. Nevertheless, his status as lord of the Arverni is evident in the numbers of men and tribes that he could call to his banner, and he might have succeeded against a less determined and innovative opponent. His charisma was buttressed by cold political calculation, demonstrated by his habit of taking hostages from allied tribes to ensure their continued loyalty to him. Though he ran his campaign through the strength of his personality, he almost certainly understood that using his numbers to wear away his enemy’s resolve would be his biggest advantage over the Romans. Despite this, by retreating to Alesia he surrendered the initiative and gave Caesar a chance to show what a well-organized and -trained army could do. (Jochen Jahnke/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

The organization and leadership of a Gallic army was a challenging affair. They took a long time to gather, and once they had finally assembled the lack of any significant logistical system meant that armies could not stay in the field for long periods, thus encouraging them to seek out and confront their

enemies in what would ideally be a decisive battle; this in turn encouraged commanders who were bold, personally courageous, but without wide tactical experience. As with most tribal armies, broad and simple orders would be passed to individual formations commanded by the most senior chieftains, who would then use their personal authority to ensure that the men did what was needed. Managing complex formations, changing formation once battle had been joined and responding to unanticipated actions of the enemy were usually beyond the capabilities of a Gallic commander.

Bibracte

28 June 58 BC

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The proximate cause of the campaign of 58 BC was the attempted migration of the Helvetii and a number of allied tribes from the Alps into more propitious territory on the Atlantic coast of Gaul. The Helvetian lands were on the northern marches of Gallia Cisalpina, and their chosen route would cut through Roman territory as well as lands occupied by tribes allied to Rome – something that brought with it opportunity for a man like Caesar. In the dying days of March 58 BC he had arrived in Genava (modern-day Geneva) from Rome after word reached him of the migration; the Helvetii had requested permission to pass through parts of Gallia Transalpina, but Caesar delayed, eventually refusing them after he had reinforced his position by marshalling his legions in the Alps. With the most straightforward route denied to them, the Helvetians moved north-east into the territory of the Sequani with the latter's permission, but the passage of so large a number of people inevitably caused friction, notably among the Allobroges and the Aedui. Both tribes were allied to Rome, and both now called on Caesar to help stop the depredation of their lands by the Helvetii.

Caesar noted that the desire of the Helvetii to move west had been spurred by the constricted opportunities of their traditional lands:

... the Helvetii are closely confined by the nature of their territory ... In such circumstances their range of movement was less extensive, and their chances of waging war on their neighbours were less easy; and on this account they were greatly distressed, for they were men that longed for war. Nay, they could not but consider that the territory they occupied – to an extent of 240 miles long and 180 broad [355km by 266km] – was all too narrow for their population and for their renown of courage in war. (Caesar, *CBG* 1.2)



A detailed view of Plate E from the interior of the Gundestrup cauldron, showing a line of Celtic horsemen, infantry and *carnyx* players in a scene that likely depicts the rebirth of fallen warriors. Though obviously symbolic, the representation of the Celtic figures seems to have been drawn from life, with distinctions of rank such as the fine breast collars and cruppers (a strap to stop a saddle from slipping) of the horses and the decorated helmets of their riders contrasting with the regular spears and shields of the plain foot soldiers. (Malene Thyssen/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

Even accounting for Roman assumptions about the incorrigibly warlike nature of Celtic tribes, there is probably some truth in Caesar's observation; status within and between tribes was won and retained through feats of arms, and the prospect of new enemies and fresh fields to plunder was likely to be highly attractive to tribes hemmed in by mountains and rivers. The Greek geographer Strabo described them thus:

It is said also that the Elvetii, although rich in gold, none the less turned themselves to robbery upon seeing the opulence of the Cimbri; but that on their campaigns two of their tribes (there were three) were obliterated. But still the number of the descendants from what was left of them was shown by their war against the Deified Caesar, in which about four hundred thousand lives were destroyed. (Strabo, *Geographica* 4.3.3)

It is entirely likely that the movement of such a large and bellicose people caused real problems for tribes like the Allobroges and the Aedui, but Caesar was not obligated to go to war on their behalf; that he did so was within the scope of his authority, but his motives were more personal than disinterestedly political. His decision to move into Gaul and intercept the migrating tribes certainly pleased his allies, but Caesar's actions were almost certainly driven by the desire for personal martial glory and the chance of taking significant booty, both of which were acceptable and understandable rewards of a military campaign in Roman eyes. It was

certainly a bold undertaking. The Helvetii and their allied tribes numbered 350,000–400,000 in all, had planned their move for several years, and had burned their *oppida*, fields and homes before they left in stark testament to their determination.

The tribal migration is usually seen as a Helvetian undertaking and they were by far the largest contingent involved, but four other tribes joined them in their endeavour. The Helvetii themselves were made up of four tribal groups (the Tigurini, the Verbigeni, the Tougeni and an unnamed tribe); they had close ties with their neighbouring tribes and allies the Tulingi, who had fought with the Helvetii in the Cimbrian War half a century beforehand, and the Raurici, originally situated on the banks of the Rhine, 20km from the modern-day city of Basel. They were supplemented by the Latovici, a tribe probably from the area of the upper Danube, and the Boii, an eastern Celtic tribe that had recently been displaced from their territory in Dacia (northern Hungary). The Boii – and possibly the Latovici – eventually moved into Helvetian lands and joined with the Helvetii, probably as vassal tribes, on their migration westwards. Documents that Caesar said he obtained from the Helvetian camp described the migrants, 368,000 of them in all: 263,000 Helvetii, 36,000 Tulingi, 14,000 Latovici, 23,000 Raurici and 32,000 Boii. The combined military strength of all five tribes was 92,000 men – a reasonable number assuming that the overall figure of 368,000 was accurate – and that figure would have included all the various types of infantry as well as any associated cavalry (Cunliffe 2018: 156–57).



A small fragment of original *lorica squamata* (scale armour) found in the west of England, probably dating from the 1st century AD. Though not as common as the *lorica hamata*, scale armour had a long history and during late Republican times it was likely used by notable individuals in the legion such as centurions, the *aquilifer* and *signifer*, though it is impossible to gauge how widespread its employment was among the rank and file. (Gaius Cornelius/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

Caesar's infantry force was composed of six legions and an unknown number of auxiliary light troops, probably made up from a mix of allied tribal levies and specialist mercenary contingents. The heart of the army was composed of the four veteran legions – Legio VII, Legio VIII, Legio IX and Legio X – together with the two legions that Caesar had recently raised for the campaign, Legio XI and Legio XII, probably drawn from Gallia Cisalpina and for which Caesar had to pay personally (as they had not been raised under the authority of the Senate, they were not funded by the state). Caesar's cavalry was 4,000 men strong, made up of levies drawn from the Aedui, their allies, and all the other tribes of Gallia Cisalpina. There seems little doubt that the horsemen, comprised of warlords and their retinues, were individually well-armed and -armoured, experienced riders who were highly capable and individually brave. Even so, their very nature – disparate bands of men with a multitude of alliances, obligations and personal objectives – meant that although they all followed Caesar's orders, they probably did not operate as a coherent force. They certainly lacked the regularity and discipline of the legions, making them difficult to control on the battlefield.

Bibracte, 28 June 58 BC

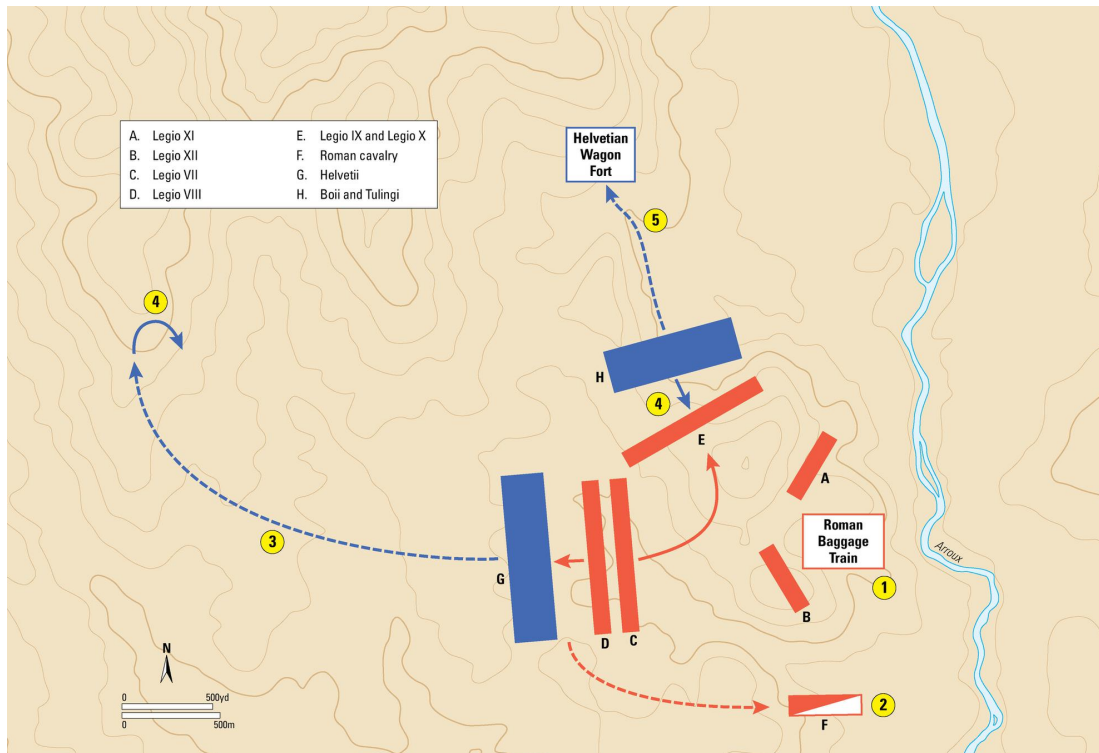
MAP KEY

- 1** Caesar, withdrawing to the heights of a nearby hill, secures his baggage train. He draws up his four veteran legions (Legio VII, Legio VIII, Legio IX and Legio X) in three battle lines on the slopes of the hill, keeping the two recently raised and inexperienced legions (Legio XI and Legio XII) with him, together with all his auxiliary troops, guarding the baggage train.
- 2** Caesar's screen of allied cavalry is broken in the face of the Helvetii's advance, retreating off the field.
- 3** The Helvetii (possibly including the Latovici and the Raurici) attack towards the Roman lines in tightly packed ranks, but are disorganized by volleys of *pila*. The first and second Roman lines attack, forcing the Helvetii to retreat towards the relative safety of a nearby hill, pursued by the legionaries.
- 4** The Tulingi and the Boii arrive on the field, advancing on the Roman flank. The Roman third line, kept in reserve until now, wheels around to meet this emerging threat. The new attack heartens the Helvetii, who begin to push back against the legionaries who had so recently forced them to retreat.
- 5** The attack of the Tulingi and the Boii is eventually thrown back, the tribes retreating to the location of their baggage train in the hills to the north-west, where they use wagons to set up a defensive perimeter. The fighting on the western and northern flanks continues far into the evening before the combined forces of the Helvetii finally withdraw. Caesar's legions, exhausted by the tenacity of their opponents and the intensity and duration of the battle, are unable to mount a pursuit.



Looking southwards from the heights of Mont Beuvray (the site of the ancient *oppidum* of Bibracte) towards the modern-day town of Montmort and the rivers Auzon and Arroux, the probable location of the battle. As with many ancient encounters, accurate identification of the battlefield is a blend of primary source analysis, geography and archaeology, but with little in the way of definitive proof. The image does convey the nature of the terrain in the area, a blend of closely forested hills and valleys dotted with clearings and cut through by winding rivers, making it difficult ground to manoeuvre through quickly or securely.

(Christophe.Finot/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 2.5**)



Battlefield environment

The site Caesar picked for the battle was chosen of necessity, not as the result of planning. With his rearguard involved in a running battle with pursuing Gauls, he made the best of his situation by establishing a position on a readily defensible hill. Caesar's position on the high ground was backed by the River Arroux, running north to south – an effective barrier to any deep flanking attacks towards his rear, but a potentially deadly obstacle should his forces be pushed off the hill. There were other hills to the north and west of the Roman position, with the westerly heights being around 1 Roman mile (1.48km) distant, while those to the north are likely to have been somewhat further away, but still within striking distance. The Roman baggage train was gathered together and defended by the two novice legions as well as all the allied auxiliaries; the Helvetians in turn established a camp for their baggage train on the high ground to the north-west. Caesar's description of the local grain being not

yet ripe (part of the reason for his attempt to reach the *oppidum* of Bibracte, some 18 Roman miles (27km) to the north) sites the encounter in early summer, with no particular weather of note recorded by Caesar on the day of battle itself.

INTO COMBAT

Caesar set out in pursuit of the Helvetii, moving through the Alps with a force of five legions (the sixth remaining behind under the command of Titus Labienus and which followed on a little after), arriving in the territory of the Allobroges a week later. Hastening after the migrating Celts, Caesar caught up with the Helvetii on 10 June as they were in the process of crossing the broad and sluggish River Arar (now known as the Saône) by means of rafts and small boats lashed together, his scouts informing him that three-quarters of the enemy had already made it to the opposite shore. Upon hearing this Caesar lost no time and 'left camp in the third watch with three legions and came up to the division of the enemy which had not yet crossed. He attacked them unawares when they were heavily loaded, and put a great number of them to the sword; the remainder betook themselves to flight and hid in the nearest woods' (Caesar, *CBG* 1.12). In the wake of this victory the Romans wasted no time, throwing a bridge over the Arar within a single day so that they could continue their pursuit – the Helvetii had taken 20 days to make their crossing. Caesar believed that the speed of his pursuit and the ruthlessness of the attack at the Arar gave the Helvetii pause, causing them to send a delegation to try to treat with him. Such reasoning might have been self-aggrandizing but it was not necessarily wrong, as there is little doubt that the Helvetii would not have countenanced a parley if they considered Caesar to pose no threat.

In the talks the Helvetii were represented by Divico, leader of the Tigurini and a veteran warrior who had fought Rome in a number of battles for nearly half a century. He offered peace, with his tribe agreeing to relocate to wherever Caesar thought fit, but made it clear that the Helvetii were not to be trifled with; if Caesar thought that his victory at the Arar would weaken their resolve, he was wrong – they had a reputation as courageous fighters, learned from their ancestors, and would not shy away from war if that was what Rome desired. For his part Caesar stated that, if they provided hostages and offered recompense to the Aedui and the Allobroges for the damage they

had done, he would grant them their peace. Divico replied that it was the Helvetii practice to receive hostages, not provide them, and with that the two sides parted.

The following day the Helvetii moved off once more, with Caesar in close pursuit. His entire cavalry force of 4,000 horsemen was thrown forward to ensure that the Romans could track every movement that the Helvetii made, but in a moment of rashness they attacked the Celtic rearguard; though it was only 500 men strong the Helvetii had the advantage of better ground, and soon routed the entire force of Roman cavalry. The losses in manpower were slight, but so easy a victory against such steep odds gave a great boost to the morale of the Helvetii and encouraged them to be more belligerent, though a cautious Caesar refused to engage; instead he kept pace with them for the next two weeks, the two sides usually camping less than 10km away from one another on any given day.



A Celtic torc made from a copper alloy with 'fused-buffer'-style 'terminals', from northern France, dating from the 4th–3rd centuries BC. A torc was a solid-metal neck ring that ended in a pair of terminals – decorative ends that met at the base of the wearer's throat. Torcs could be made from a single length of a non-precious alloy or metal, but more elaborate versions were made from gold, sometimes from twined strands to give a corded appearance, and with more elaborate terminals. They are often depicted in Gallic and Celtic art and were certainly symbols of an individual's status, though they may have also had religious connotations for their bearers as well. (metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0 1.0)



A finely made terret (the rein guide used by charioteers) of copper alloy and decorated with champlevé enamel, made at around the time of the Roman conquest of Britain in the 1st century AD. The use of the chariot in warfare was still common among British tribes during the time of the invasion, but it seems to have been out of fashion in Gaul during Caesar's campaigns – something made clear by the surprise of his troops when encountering the unfamiliar chariots during his excursion to Britain in 55 BC (Caesar, *CBG* 4.33–34). Other continental Celtic cultures (as well as some Germanic tribes) seem to have still employed chariots in battle, but there is no record of why this weapon had been abandoned by the Gauls after the end of the 2nd century BC. ([metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0 1.0](https://www.metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0))

Such peregrinations were brought to a close when Caesar was informed by his scouts that the Helvetii had made camp very close to some heights, not more than 12km away. A reconnaissance of the high ground confirmed that it was accessible, and would provide an excellent position from which to launch an attack; Caesar immediately ordered Titus Labienus to take two legions and seize the topmost ridge of the high ground, while he would follow the route the Helvetii had taken and advance on them, his entire cavalry force thrown ahead of him in a screen. 'At dawn Labienus was in possession of the summit of the height, and Caesar was no more than a mile and a half [2.2km] from the enemy's camp; and, as he learnt afterwards from prisoners, neither his own approach nor that of Labienus was discovered' (Caesar, *CBG* 1.22). The blow was about to fall when Publius Considius, a well-regarded veteran who was working with the scouts, galloped towards Caesar and told him that Labienus did not hold the heights – the Celts did, he had seen their banners and was sure of it. His plan of attack apparently thwarted and with no word from Labienus, Caesar pulled his forces back into a defensive position on a nearby hill. Labienus for his part was sitting ready on the heights awaiting Caesar, his orders not to move until the other legions appeared below. Thus a potentially devastating ambush attack simultaneously

launched from two different directions came to nothing because of poor communication and the imagination of an overwrought officer. The Helvetii moved away, but must have eventually realized how close the Romans had come to them; Caesar, frustrated, resumed his pursuit, camping 7km away from his lucky foe.

Following his enemy and manoeuvring for advantage would hopefully provide another opportunity like the one ruined by Considius, but Caesar was also dealing with logistical issues that he could no longer ignore. Problems with the reliable sourcing of food had been an ongoing concern from the beginning of the campaign, in part due to the internal factional politics of tribes allied to Rome, and so Caesar, with his army's next issue of grain only two days away, opted to break off the pursuit of the Helvetii and instead make for the *oppidum* of Bibracte. As the main centre of his allies the Aedui, it was a location replete with all the supplies his legions could desire. This change of direction was quickly reported to the Helvetii by Gallic deserters from one of Caesar's allied cavalry units. Caesar speculated that the Helvetii may have guessed at his potential supply issues, or that they interpreted his failure to engage them several days previously despite his advantageous position as a sign of weakness – in any event, the Celtic force quickly changed direction, now pursuing the Roman rearguard with determination, harrying it at every opportunity.



An auxiliary-type figure with an oval *clipeus* (shield) and *hasta* (throwing spears) from a column base found in Mainz, Germany. The gradual removal of the light-infantry *velites* from the Roman legions did not mean that the need for such troops had diminished. Rather such roles would now fall to the Latin allied contingents, mercenaries and local levies drawn from

Rome's increasing number of provinces, that latter aspect in particular giving the legions access to specialist types of light infantry from the edge of Iberia all the way to Asia Minor. The role of such troops – to keep the light infantry of the enemy at bay while harassing their main formations – was unchanged, as were the weapons they used to do it: javelins, slingshot and arrows. (DEA/A. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini via Getty Images)

The Helvetians' consistent and aggressive attacks on the Roman rearguard clearly didn't bode well and Caesar, appreciating that the situation could rapidly descend into something of a disaster, made for a nearby hill, it being the most readily defensible position that his forces could occupy. The cavalry screened the approaches to the Roman position, while the bulk of Caesar's force – the four veteran legions (Legio VII, Legio VIII, Legio IX and Legio X) – were established in three lines around halfway up the slope of the hill. There is no surviving record of the exact deployment of the legions on the hillside, but the first two lines were each composed of a single legion while the third line had two legions and was intended as a reserve. The two newly

raised legions – Legio XI and Legio XII – were stationed at the crest of the hill, in part to keep the less experienced men out of immediate harm, but also to create the impression of a position bristling with layer after layer of troops. Joining them at the top of the hill were the army's other auxiliaries and light-infantry contingents; these men, together with the two novice legions, were given the responsibility of protecting the army's baggage train; the multitude of carts, draft animals and mules had been drawn into a secure position behind the crest and were protected behind a series of entrenchments, hastily dug by the light-infantry troops and the Cisalpine legionaries.



A relief showing Romans and Gauls in pitched battle with one another; note in particular the feathered crest of what is almost certainly a centurion in the centre-left of the image. The nature of combat between the Romans and Gauls was similar to that seen in Rome's wars against various Celtic tribes during the preceding three centuries, with the 'barbarians' relying on the terror and ferocity of their initial assault to break their enemy's line, while for the legionaries the key was a mixture of discipline and courage that allowed them to endure and eventually repel their attackers. (Leemage/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The Helvetians, observing the manoeuvring of the Romans as they established themselves on the hill, set up a site for their own baggage on a similar patch of high ground, moving their infantry down onto the flat plain that lay to the west of Caesar's newly created position. Caesar dismounted and had his horse taken to the rear – a signal to his men that he wasn't going to cut and run, leaving them to their fate; rather he was going to stand with them in body and spirit, ready to fight beside them as one of them. He gave a

short speech, and then joined their ranks ready for the battle. The description of such behaviour may appear self-aggrandising, particularly when it is recounted by the very man to whom it applies, but similar actions would prove to be a consistent aspect of Caesar's leadership in Gaul. As a commander he was not without flaws, but on a number of occasions he seems to have displayed great personal bravery (consistent with accounts from his earlier life) and showed an innate understanding of the importance of leading by personal example. Facing ferociously aggressive opponents like the Helvetii could be unnerving even for veteran legionaries, and in such circumstances a steady hand and calm word must have counted for a great deal.

The Roman position was soon approached by a significant force of Helvetian infantry, probably supported by contingents from the Latovici and the Raurici, their ranks deep and so densely packed that their shields overlapped. Though Caesar makes no mention of it, it is certain that the noise of the approaching host would have been infernal, with the clatter of weapons battering against the sides of shields mixing with the blaring of *carnyxes* and the echoing din of tens of thousands of war cries and screamed insults. Caesar ordered his cavalry to leave off screening the hill and attack the advancing Helvetians, but his horsemen were quickly thrown back and routed, fleeing the field and playing no further role in the day's fight. With the approach to the Roman position on the hill now clear, rank after rank of Helvetians moved forward, advancing up the hill towards the first of the Roman lines.

Titus Labienus

Little is known about the early life of Titus Labienus; he was born c.99–98 BC in Cingulum, a town in Picenum (Ascoli Piceno), and was probably of equestrian rank. In 63 BC, he became tribune of the Plebs and held a praetorship in 60 or 59 BC. In 58 BC, he was appointed *legatus pro praetore* (essentially second-in-command of the army) by Caesar, a role that mitigated Caesar's own relative lack of military experience and one that would quickly allow Labienus to become his right-hand man as the war in Gaul

continued. He would play a significant role in the war, including at the Sabis and at Alesia, enjoying Caesar's trust and respect. Despite being made governor of Gallia Cisalpina in 51 BC as a reward for his service, Labienus soon broke with his erstwhile patron: the unstable political situation in Rome resulted in Caesar and the *Populares* (the populist faction) instigating a civil war in 49 BC, during which Labienus sided with the *Optimates* (the conservative faction) and Caesar's great rival, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey). Labienus was killed on 17 March 45 BC at the battle of Munda, the climactic encounter of the war.

The distance between the two forces closed, the Celts retaining the integrity of their line as they came ever nearer, but before they could drive home their charge they were showered with hundreds, perhaps thousands of *pila*:

The legionaries, from the upper ground, easily broke the mass-formation of the enemy by a volley of javelins, and, when it was scattered, drew their swords and charged. The Gauls were greatly encumbered for the fight because several of their shields would be pierced and fastened together by a single javelin-cast; and as the iron became bent, they could not pluck it forth, nor fight handily with the left arm encumbered. Therefore many of them preferred, after continued shaking of the arm, to cast off the shield and so to fight bare-bodied. (Caesar, *CBG* 1.25)

The action of the *pilum* is well-described by Caesar; the relatively heavy weight of the weapon combined with its small head and long, narrow shank made it capable of punching through shields, and on occasion the men that sheltered behind them. The dense nature of the Celtic line made hits easy to achieve, especially as the casting distance was likely only around 15m. Modern recreations have confirmed the impossibility of carrying a shield impaled with a *pilum*, and the prospect of charging uphill into a solid wall of Roman *scuta* bristling with *gladii* while carrying only a spear or sword must have been daunting.

Divico

By the time of the migration of the Helvetii into Gaul their leader, Divico, was an old man. Caesar first mentions him as having been the 'commander of the Helvetii in the war against Cassius' (Caesar, *CBG* 1.8), a reference to a campaign fought in the Cimbrian War (113–101 BC); Divico had led the Tigurini (one of the tribes that made up the Helvetii) into Gaul in 109 BC, and during the battle of Burdigala in 107 BC he and his Germanic allies were responsible for the crushing defeat of a Roman army and the deaths of its commanders, Lucius Cassius Longinus and Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus (the latter being the grandfather of Caesar's father-in-law). Though the Cimbrian War eventually ended in a Roman victory, Divico's Tigurini escaped the worst of it and re-crossed the Alps to the safety of their main tribal lands. Forty-nine years later, Divico was still chieftain of the Tigurini and possibly the other Helvetian tribes as well, and led them on their attempted westward migration across Gaul. Divico's frosty meeting with Caesar confirmed the enmity between the two sides, leading to the battle at Bibracte; there is no further mention of Divico in the aftermath of the Helvetian defeat.

The storm of *pila* had disrupted the integrity of the Helvetian line and stalled their advance, allowing the initiative to pass to the Romans. A charge drove the disordered Helvetians back down the slope, though they weren't routed. The traditional Roman view of Celts was that their morale was brittle and unable to absorb serious reverses, but here they continued to fight as they fell back, with Caesar observing how it was only 'At length, worn out with wounds, they began to retreat' (Caesar, *CBG* 1.25). The Helvetians pulled back towards a hill about 1 Roman mile (1.48km) distant, with the three Roman lines moving after them; neither side broke, and it seems likely that this was a fighting retreat, with the pursuing Romans driving forward and maintaining some sort of contact with the Celts, who had to throw them off periodically to continue with their retreat. Eventually the Helvetians made it to the hill and drew themselves up into a more defensible position, with the Romans now having to advance up a slope to engage their enemy.



A marble rendering of a slain Celtic warrior, a Roman copy of a (probably bronze) original, one of a number of statues from the city of Pergamon that were created to celebrate the victory of Attalus I over the Galatians (as the Celts of Asia Minor were known) in 238 BC. As with the citizens of Pergamon, it suited the Romans to draw their more formidable enemies in heroic terms, thus helping to explain their own defeats at Celtic hands as well as to heighten the glory that Rome enjoyed in its victories over them. (Leemage/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

At this point the Celtic rearguard began to arrive on the field. Consisting of 15,000 men from the Tulingi and the Boii, the Celts moved from their line of march straight into a battle formation and began to advance on the northern flank of the Roman lines. The Roman attack on the Helvetians had seen all three lines move down from the hill in pursuit of the enemy, but only the first two lines were fully engaged in the fighting – the third line, consisting of the two reserve legions, was uncommitted. The approach of the Tulingi and the Boii was potentially catastrophic as they were fresh, numerous and in a formation that could potentially envelop the north flank of the Roman lines. The appearance of their allies gave new heart to the Helvetians, who started forward from their defensive position on the hill, determined to press the legionaries in sympathy with the developing attack coming from the north. At this point the Roman third line wheeled around from its position in support of the first two lines, drawing itself across the path of the approaching Tulingi and the Boii and refusing the Roman northern flank.

The battle devolved into two separate spheres, both hard-fought and with no quick resolution. Gradually, the two Roman contingents began to push the Celts back, the Helvetians towards the hill to which they had initially retreated, the Tulingi and the Boii towards the Celtic baggage park. In a situation where combat continued for long periods of time, each side crashing into the other up and down the line and engaging in intense bursts of fighting, before falling back a safe distance to recover, the Romans had a

definite advantage. The highly organized nature of a legion meant that units could be swapped out of the line when they were exhausted, letting fresh (or at least fresher) troops take their place to keep the pressure on the Celts. In addition, the sort of regimented close-order fighting in which the legionaries were trained likely stood up better to long periods of sustained combat than the more individual, mercurial fighting style of most Celtic warriors. Such advantages took their toll on the Helvetians, the Tulingi and the Boii, but though they were slowly pushed ever further backwards, their lines did not break. Caesar recalled that

There was no rout, for throughout the action, though it lasted from the seventh hour to eventide, no one could have seen the back of an enemy. Even round the baggage the fight was continued far into the night, as the enemy had constructed a rampart of carts, and from the higher ground they continued to hurl missiles upon our advancing lines, while some of them kept discharging native pikes and darts from underneath the carts and wheels, wounding our men. (Caesar, *CBG* 1.26)

The slow-grinding Roman machine eventually won through, with the Helvetians withdrawing from their hill, and the Tulingi and the Boii abandoning their fortified positions around the baggage train to the encroaching legionaries. The Celts slipped away during the night, and there was little Caesar could do to stop them, so serious was the state of his own army after the engagement. There are no casualty figures for the Romans at Bibracte, but for three days Caesar's legions busied themselves with tending to their wounded and burying their dead, which gives some sense of how hard-fought the battle had been. When his forces were fit to move once again, Caesar lost no time in undertaking a pursuit of the Helvetii, but it was a shorter chase than he had anticipated. While the battle had certainly been costly for the Romans, it had proved ruinous for the Celtic tribes; the Helvetians were broken by their tremendous casualties that almost certainly ran into tens of thousands, a situation exacerbated by the loss of their baggage train which soon left them starving and destitute. They sued for peace, with Caesar accepting their surrender after they provided him with hostages, weapons and those who had deserted to them from his own forces.



A representation of some of the Gallic trophies displayed on the Triumphal Arch of Orange, sited in the town of Orange in south-eastern France. The Arch, erected only a few decades after Caesar's wars, is one of the most valuable sources of evidence for Gallic weapons and equipment. Of note are the variety of patterns on the shields, the boar standards, swords and *carnyxes*, all of which it is reasonable to assume have been drawn from examples of contemporary Roman trophies taken in the war. (Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The Boii, their reputation as fearsome fighters standing them in good stead, were allowed to remain with the Aedui. For the Helvetii, the Latovici and the Tulingi who had survived the battle and their remaining tribespeople, the future lay back the way they had come, Strabo noting that in the aftermath of the battle 'Caesar allowed the rest of them, about eight thousand, to escape, so as not to abandon the country, destitute of inhabitants, to the Germans, whose territory bordered on theirs' (Strabo, *Geo.* 4.3.3). Even assuming that the figure Strabo gives is exaggeratedly small – Caesar himself gives the number of survivors at 110,000, based on a census he ordered once they had returned to their old lands – it probably does signify that the majority of the Helvetians and their allies who journeyed into Gaul never returned to their erstwhile homelands. They were given grain for their journey by the Allobroges, and ordered to rebuild all that they had burnt upon their departure those few short months ago. Even so the Helvetians were fortunate,

in a way. The defeat they had endured was terrible, but the price they paid was to act as a buffer between the Roman province of Gallia Cisalpina and the Germanic tribes to the north; in the coming years entire populations would fall before Caesar's sword, either lying dead on the field of battle or seeing their remnants disappear into slavery.

The Sabis

13 August 57 BC

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Caesar's army did not withdraw to his provinces in the wake of the battle at Bibracte, but instead found themselves in another campaign, this time against an invading confederation of Germanic tribes led by the warlord Ariovistus. In the act of defeating them at Vesontio (Besançon) in September 58 BC, Caesar's legions effectively ended any immediate future threat from east of the Rhenus, and had secured the Central Gallic border with Germania. In such a circumstance Caesar decided that his army, rather than withdraw back to Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Transalpina, would instead make itself at home in the lands of the Sequani, where they would establish their winter quarters. The continued presence of Romans in the heart of Gaul was deeply unsettling to many of the neighbouring Gallic tribes, however, giving rise to much worry and, among the northern peoples of the Belgae, active efforts to establish alliances on the assumption that Caesar would move against them next.



A rudimentary rendering of a Gallic warrior on a monument. The geographer Strabo noted the Celtic reputation for living in the moment and dressing well: 'In addition to their trait of simplicity and high-spiritedness, that of witlessness and boastfulness is much in evidence, and also that of fondness for ornaments; for they not only wear golden ornaments — both chains round their necks and bracelets round their arms and wrists — but their dignitaries wear garments that are dyed in colours and sprinkled with gold. And by reason of this levity of character they not only look insufferable when victorious, but also scared out of their wits when worsted' (Strabo, *Geo.* 4.4.5). (Chris Hellier/Getty Images)



Gallic arms. In his discussion of the relative merits of the weapons used in the Punic Wars, Polybius described 'the Gaulish sword [as] being only able to slash and requiring a long sweep to do so' (Polybius, *Histories* 3.114.3), noting that it lacked the economy and thrusting point of the *gladius Hispaniensis* used by the Iberians and Romans. Philon of Byzantium (*fl.* c.200 BC), a Greek engineer of some note, wrote in his *Belopeika* (4.71) of how the Gauls tested the excellence of their swords: they grasped the hilt in the right hand and the end of the blade in the left; then, laying it horizontally on their heads, they would pull down until both ends touched their shoulders. Next, they let go sharply, removing both hands so that the blade would snap back into its original shape, without retaining a hint of the bend. Though they repeated this test frequently, the swords remained straight (Fields 2014: 24). (Leemage/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

At the start of 57 BC, Caesar had raised a further two legions (Legio XIII and Legio XIV) from Gallia Cisalpina, bringing his total to eight: twice the number allotted to him by the Senate, and an indication of how he thought the coming year would develop. The new troops crossed the Alps at the end of March on the way to the army's encampment, with Caesar himself arriving at the start of summer. The core of his force was composed of the eight legions of heavy infantry – around 40,000 men strong if they were at or near their full complements – supported by much more modest cavalry and light-infantry detachments drawn from his allies, including Numidian mercenaries. Over

the winter it had become clear to Caesar that the northern tribes were rising against him, but he had gained an important advantage by forging an alliance with one of their number, the Remi. Unlike their belligerent neighbours, the Remi took another path and decided that a quick accommodation with Rome was the safer option, serving the same role for Caesar in the north as the Aedui did for him in the south (Gelzer 2003: 114), providing him with a potential base of operations, supplies and intelligence as to the intentions and movement of the other Belgic tribes.

Among the remaining Belgae hostility to Rome was universal, with a web of alliances and agreements being forged in anticipation of the coming war. Caesar (with the help of the Remi) was aware that the Bellovaci, the most numerous of the Belgae, had promised 60,000 men to the campaign provided they could lead it, with the Suessiones promising 50,000, the Ambiani 10,000, the Morini 25,000, and a further 69,000 from a combination of other, smaller tribes. Another faction was formed under Boduognatus, leader of 50,000 Nervii, one of the most powerful of the Belgic peoples, who forged agreements with the similarly minded 15,000-strong Atrebates, the 10,000-strong Viromandui and the 19,000-strong Atuatucae. If the Bellovaci, the Suessiones and the Nervii, along with all their allied tribes, could marshal all (or even most) of their forces successfully, they would be much more than a formidable foe. To help stop such a concentration Caesar called on his allies the Aedui, ordering them to march on the lands of the Bellovaci and cause as much havoc as possible.



The cenotaph of Marcus Caelius, *primus pilus* (senior centurion) of Legio XVIII, who was 53½ years old when he was killed in the battle of the Teutoburg Forest during the Varian War (AD 9), now located in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn. Of note is his prominent *vitae* (vine staff) clutched in his right hand and the *phalerae* (awards) that adorn his torso, indicative of the type of valorous career that led one to the role of *primus pilus*. Such men proved to be the backbone of the legionary system, leading from the front and sharing the perils of their men. Losses among their ranks were often correspondingly high, notably in encounters like the battles of the Sabis and Gergovia, but Caesar makes a point of naming individual centurions such as Publius Sextius Baculus who showed courage and resolve despite desperate circumstances and multiple wounds, using them as examples of Roman *virtus* (valour) and dedication. (Agnete/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

While the Aedui were in the process of moving towards the lands of the Bellovaci, a number of the Belgic tribes (including the Suessiones) came together and formed a great army. The Remi and Caesar's scouts informed him that the large Belgic host had started to move south, seeking him out. The

Romans lost no time in marching on the River Axona (now known as the Aisne) in the territory of the Remi, crossing it quickly and establishing a strong encampment guarded by six cohorts that would act as a supply hub for the rest of the army. After relieving a siege on the Remi *oppidum* of Bibrax and defeating attempts to interdict his supply lines, Caesar awaited his enemy's next move. For their part the Belgic army, confronted by an obstinate enemy, their home territories threatened by the advance of the Aedui, and unable to maintain their forces in the field for more than a few days due to overwhelming logistical problems, began to disintegrate. Each contingent was to return home, where they could supply themselves properly and come to the aid of their neighbours in the event that the Romans attacked them. Caesar, seeing his enemy dissolve before him, set his legions to harry them in their retreat. He quickly moved west into the land of the Suessiones where he invested their *oppidum* Noviodunum, forcing them into a quick surrender. The prospect of the Aedui on the one hand and Caesar on the other brought the Bellovaci to heel, followed in short order by the Ambiani. With the most important of the southern Belgic tribes pacified in only a few weeks, Caesar turned his attention to the north. His campaign had been so swift that that the tribes of that area, centred around the Nervii, had yet to move against him.



A representation that is usually taken to be of the Celtic horned god Cernunnos, sitting cross-legged and grasping a torc, a snake, and surrounded by animals, on Plate A of the Gundestrup cauldron. Cernunnos was one of a range of deities common throughout pre-Roman Gaul,

including Lugh (Mercury), Taranis (Jupiter), Maponos (Apollo), Brigit (Minerva), Ogmios (Hercules), Epona (the horse goddess), and a host of others local to a specific area or tribe (Cunliffe 2018: 277). (Nationalmuseum/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

Caesar, well aware of the different character of the northern Gallic tribes, gave a description of his enemy:

Traders had no means of access unto them, for they allowed no wine nor any of the other appurtenances of luxury to be imported, because they supposed that their spirit was like to be enfeebled and their courage relaxed thereby. Fierce men they were, of a great courage, denouncing and accusing the rest of the Belgae for that they had surrendered to Rome and cast away the courage of their sires. For themselves they affirmed that they would send no deputies and accept no terms of peace. (Caesar, *CBG* 2.15)

The Romans moved north, marching for three days until intelligence reached them that the Nervii were only 10 miles (14.8km) distant, waiting for them, on the far bank of the River Sabis.

The battle of the Sabis, 13 August 57 BC

MAP KEY

- 1 Six Roman legions are in the process of setting up their camp on top of a gently sloping hill on the west bank of the River Sabis. The Belgae, despite expecting a Roman force only a fraction of the size, nevertheless decide to carry out their prepared ambush, which is launched as soon as the Roman baggage train hoves into view.
- 2 Caught by surprise, the legionaries struggle to organize themselves in the face of the ferocious and widespread Belgic assault. To the north, Legio IX and Legio X form hasty battle formations, but it is more difficult for the legions at the southern end of the line as they are more dispersed due to their duties setting up the camp.
- 3 An attempt by the Atrebates to drive in the Roman northern flank is repelled by Legio IX and Legio X, both of which chase the disheartened tribesmen back down the hill and across the

river, eventually seizing the Gallic camp. In the centre, Legio VIII and Legio IX push the Viromandui back to the banks of the Sabis.

4 The Roman southern flank is under severe pressure from the Nervii, who are poised to encircle Legio VII and Legio XII as well as the half-established Roman camp. Many of the baggage handlers and the Roman cavalry flee.

5 Caesar's personal intervention stiffens morale among the legionaries of Legio VII and Legio XII, who fight back-to-back and manage to hold their own against the Nervii, despite severe casualties.

6 Legio XIII and Legio XIV begin to arrive, helping to turn the tide of the fight on the southern flank. The decisive blow is delivered by Legio X, which crosses back over to the west bank of the river and drives into the rear of the Nervii, breaking the enemy attack and forcing the Belgae to retreat, allowing Caesar to consolidate his position.

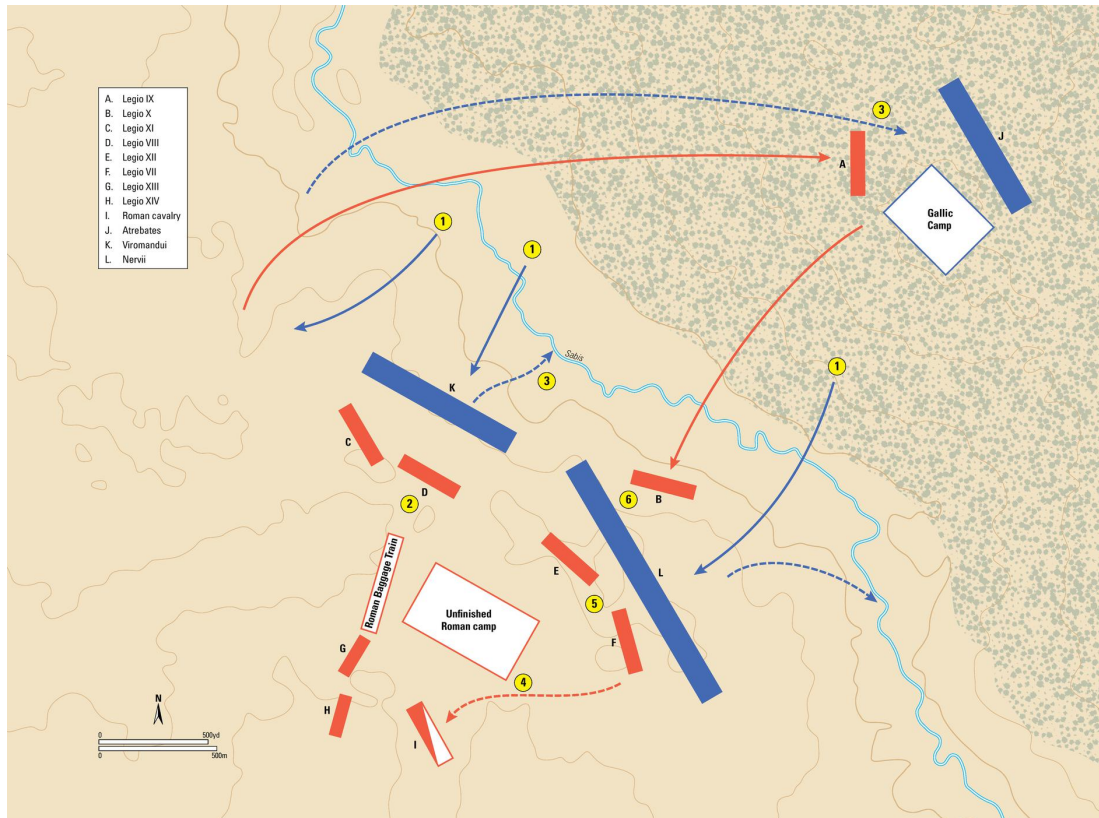
Battlefield environment

The terrain through which the Belgic and Roman armies were manoeuvring was broken and hilly, often dense with forest or abatis-style hedgerows, and crossed with watercourses as well as traditional tracks and pathways. The battlefield was bisected by the River Sabis, quite broad at this time of year, but shallow (around 90cm deep) and easy enough for a man to ford. The east bank was clear for about 300m, after which dense forest covered the land which rose up in a series of shallow hills, giving near-perfect cover for the thousands of Belgic tribesmen who were lying in wait for Caesar. The Belgic camp – a combined affair that served as the staging area for all three tribes – was located deep within the forest, well-concealed from the Romans. On the west bank, though there is no mention of woodland, Caesar does make reference to the presence of the Nervii's abatis (obstructions made from young trees) that disrupted the

battlefield. The ground rose up in a relatively gentle slope perhaps 500m long, terminating in a soft crestline behind which lay the broad open space upon which the Romans had decided to set up their camp. It being mid-August, the weather was good, with most days being hot and clear.



A modern-day view of the River Selle, near Saulzoir in northern France. At the time of the encounter the river would have been much broader, but shallow enough to wade through without difficulty. There is still no definitive agreement as to the location of the battle of the Sabis, with competing theories that favour either the River Sambre (the traditional view which should not be discounted), a significant western tributary of the River Meuse, or the River Selle, a more modest tributary of the River Scheldt (favoured by the French classicist Abbé Pierre Turquin). The map is based on the likelihood that the encounter took place either around or a little way to the north-west of the modern town of Saulzoir, located on the River Selle. The battlefield was defined by the shallow, quick-running river with gently sloping hills rising on both sides of its banks, topographical characteristics that may have been the inspiration for its traditional name of 'Selle', the Old French word for a saddle. (Claude_villetaneuse/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)



INTO COMBAT

Boduognatus of the Nervii had been joined by the Atrebatas and the Viromandui in a force that numbered around 60,000 men – the Atuatuci had also promised their support but were yet to join up with the main body; nevertheless, they could not be discounted. The variety of troop types and the balance of foot soldiers to horsemen in the Belgic army are not clear, but Caesar did note that the Nervii were almost entirely made up of infantry, so it can be assumed that what cavalry there were came from the Atrebatas and the Viromandui. Strabo described the type of equipment and weapons the Nervii and their allies would have used:

The Gallic armour is commensurate with the large size of their bodies: a long sabre, which hangs along the right side, and a long oblong shield, and spears in proportion, and a ‘madaris’, a special kind of javelin. But some of them also use bows and slings. There is also a certain wooden instrument resembling the ‘grosphus’ [a narrow throwing spear with a wooden haft no thicker than a man’s finger and *c.*80–90cm in length, that] is hurled by hand, not by thong, and ranges even farther than an arrow. (Strabo, *Geo.* 4.4.3)

Boduognatus had learned from friendly Gauls travelling with Caesar's army that the Roman habit for a route of march consisted of legions interspersed with long and tempting baggage trains. In such a circumstance if they set upon the lead legion just as it was making camp it would be easy meat, with its following baggage there for the taking. The speed and destruction of such an attack would see the battle over and done with before any other legions could arrive to offer support; the Belgic tactics would be augmented by the abatis (young trees bent over and interleaved to create impenetrable obstacles) that peppered the lands of the Nervii and which would help thwart any attempt by the Roman cavalry to relieve their comrades. Such a plan to defeat the Romans in detail, making the most of the terrain and man-made obstacles, was both practical and ambitious, but it relied upon the Romans playing their part.

Caesar varied his *agmen* (order of march) depending on the terrain and the dispositions of the enemy, with the usual form indeed being for each legion to march in column, followed immediately by its own baggage train, then the next legion and so on, with the cavalry screening the head and rear of the column. However in this instance Caesar, manoeuvring in unknown enemy territory, had reorganized his force; he was now moving with his cavalry in the vanguard followed by his six veteran legions in light field order, then the baggage train of the whole army behind them, and finally the two newest legions (Legio XIII and Legio XIV) bringing up the rear, providing security. Such organization showed that Caesar was well aware of the potential danger that might arise from an unexpected encounter, and it ensured that he could deploy the bulk of his force from the route of march straight into battle formations without worrying about the encumbrance of individual baggage trains.



Examples of deliberately ruined Celtic swords. Polybius (and later Plutarch) both made reference to Celtic swords bending practically double on the first blow in battle, much like those shown here, but this needs qualification. First, there was no consistent 'standard' for weapon-making across the Celtic world. While some swords were undoubtedly of poor quality the Celts were generally fine metalworkers, and examination of surviving archaeological examples bears out their workmanship. Second, it is unlikely that a culture so invested in warfare would tolerate the continued use of weapons that were more or less useless after the first blow, certainly among its better-equipped warrior classes. The swords in the image are examples of relatively common archaeological finds, in which blades were consciously put beyond use, almost certainly as part of ritual offerings or burial rites (Pleiner 1993: 157–61).
(Leemage/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Caesar's force was fast approaching the position of the Nervii, though the exact strength and location of the main Belgic contingent was still a matter of conjecture for him. Roman scouts had selected a suitable area for the army's encampment, on a broad area of high ground that sloped down to the River Sabis, beyond which the ground became heavily wooded. On the far bank of the Sabis, between the river and the woods, bands of Belgic horsemen could be seen, prompting Caesar to send his cavalry together with the light infantry (consisting of slingers and archers) down the hill and across the shallow, fast-running waters, where they engaged the enemy riders. At first the Gauls retired quickly into the relative safety of the woodland, but soon they charged back out to engage the Roman light infantry and cavalry in what seems to have been an ongoing series of see-saw skirmishes, the Belgic horsemen

sticking close to the cover offered by the forest with the Roman contingents wary of approaching too near to the trees.

Caesar, apparently satisfied that the whirling bands of Belgic horsemen below were the full extent of enemy forces in the area, ordered his arriving legions to begin setting up the encampment. Despite the fact that he had more than enough troops at his disposal for the task, he established no guard or other covering force to defend the construction of the encampment, the usual practice in hostile territory. Nor does he mention sending out scouts further afield, or attempting to penetrate the forest opposite to ensure that it was free of danger – an unusual and potentially disastrous oversight. As far as the construction of a camp was concerned, it was a well-practised part of a legionary's life. The fortifications were relatively simple and consisted of three parts; first a ditch (the *fossa*, usually 1m deep and 1.5m wide) was excavated around the camp's perimeter; then an elevated walkway (the *agger*) was constructed out of the turfs excavated from the ditch; and finally, wooden stakes (carried in the legion's baggage train) were driven into the top of the elevated walkway to create a palisade (Sage 2018: 153). Such work was, however, quite labour-intensive, and necessarily saw the legionaries dispersed over a wide area and set to their work without the encumbrance of armour or shields.

For the Gauls it was a bittersweet sight. The Romans were within striking distance, but instead of one legion followed by a plump and tempting baggage train, here were six in a row, one after the other, spreading out on the high ground and busying themselves with quotidian affairs. Soon enough the first of the baggage started to appear, and Boduognatus, the essentials of his plan unchanged despite the vastly increased number of Romans his forces would have to face, decided to press ahead with his attack. The Belgic tribes had already organized themselves into their battle formations under cover of the forest, waiting patiently for the signal to advance that now came at long last.

The serried ranks of tribesmen broke out of the covering woods in a vast roaring mass that stretched from one edge of the Roman position to the other. The Belgic northern wing was made up of the Atrebates, the centre by the Viromandui, and the southern wing by the Nervii. The Roman cavalry and light infantry on the eastern side of the river were immediately brushed aside, retreating in disorder in the face of such an onslaught. Caesar described how 'with incredible speed the enemy rushed down to the river, so that almost at

the same moment they were seen at the edge of the woods, in the river, and then at close quarters. Then with the same speed they hastened up-hill against our camp and the troops engaged in entrenching it' (Caesar, *CBG* 2.19). The shock within the Roman position must have been palpable. When in prepared lines or well-established positions the Roman legionary stood a good chance of withstanding a typical Gallic charge; but to be set upon after a long day's march while mostly unarmoured, dispersed, and in the midst of hard manual labour was another matter entirely. Caesar's account gives a clear indication of how unprepared the Romans were to meet this attack:

Caesar had everything to do at one moment – the flag to raise, as signal of a general call to arms; the trumpet-call to sound; the troops to recall from entrenching; the men to bring in who had gone somewhat farther afield in search of stuff for the ramp; the line to form; the troops to harangue; the signal to give. A great part of these duties was prevented by the shortness of the time and the advance of the enemy. (Caesar, *CBG* 2.20)

The immediate situation was saved by two factors: first, the legionaries, well-trained and experienced, instinctively understood what they ought to be doing without instruction from their centurions; second, Caesar had ensured that the legion commanders had remained with their respective headquarters during the construction of the camp, and these men didn't need to wait for his orders to try to take the situation in hand.

The legions were spread across the length of the high ground, each defending their own patch of ground and fighting their own discrete battle with the Gauls. The northern wing was held by Legio XI and Legio X, the centre by Legio XI and Legio VIII, and the southern wing (which was closest to the half-constructed encampment) by Legio VII and Legio XII. Caesar moved up and down the lines, exhorting Legio X on the northern flank to have courage and remember their previous deeds of valour as the Atrebatres came ever closer to their position. He gave the legions the order to engage the enemy and then left them to their own devices, rushing off towards his other legions with the intent of giving them the same sort of encouragement, only to find them already heavily engaged with the enemy:



A statue of a Gaul. Dionysius of Halicarnassus described the battle fatigue that wore down the Gauls faster than their Roman enemies: 'Not only did their strength desert many of the barbarians as their limbs failed them through weariness, but their weapons also were either blunted or broken or no longer serviceable. For besides the blood that flowed from their wounds, the sweat pouring out over their whole bodies would not let them either grasp their swords or hold their shields firmly, since their fingers slipped on the handles and no longer kept a firm hold. The Romans, however, being accustomed to many toils by reason of their unabating and continuous warfare, continued to meet every peril in noble fashion' (Dionysius, *Rhomaïke Arkhaiologia* 14.10.19). (Leemage/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The time was so short, the temper of the enemy so ready for conflict, that there was no space not only to fit badges in their places, but even to put on helmets and draw covers from shields. In whichever direction each man chanced to come in from the entrenching, whatever standard each first caught sight of, by that he stood, to lose no fighting time in seeking out his proper company. (Caesar, *CBG* 2.21)

As the Atrebates struggled up the hill towards the positions held by Legio IX and Legio X, they were met by a shower of *pila* that caused havoc in their ranks, their advance faltering. In a blink the legionaries had drawn their swords and charged down the shallow slope, crashing into the tribesmen and driving them back the way they had come. Under the command of Titus Labienus the two legions pursued the Atrebates across the river and deep into the woods, eventually coming upon the Gallic camp which they overran. In the centre, Legio XI and Legio VIII were engaged in a vicious fight with

the Viromandui, and were gradually pushing them back down the hill. Dionysius of Halicarnassus gave a description of the Gallic style of fighting that applied equally well to the Belgic tribes that Caesar's legionaries were facing:

Legio X halts the charge of the Atrebates



Roman view: The combined Belgic tribes led by the Nervii had anticipated a great slaughter when they had thought Caesar's legions were interspersed with long baggage trains, making the legions vulnerable to attack one after the other. When the Roman army approached, however, six of Caesar's eight legions were marching together, the baggage following on and two remaining inexperienced legions far behind them. Despite the strength of their enemy the combined Belgic tribes attacked, surging out of the woods, scattering the Roman cavalry, storming across the river and charging up the slopes towards the shocked legionaries, who were in the act of setting up their camp. The men of Legio X were no better prepared than their comrades, but they still had their officers with them and their long years of campaigning experience also began to tell. Even without orders they began to organize themselves, and were soon bolstered by a few words of encouragement from Caesar himself before he made off to shore up the rest of his fragmented line. The tribe advancing on them, the Atrebates, were beginning to slow from

the effort of running so far so fast, the last stretch uphill to boot, and it was at this point that the legionaries reared back and hurled their *pila* into the approaching throng, an act that would be followed up with a charge, *scuta* raised and *gladii* drawn. The shock of being showered with many hundreds of deadly spears followed by a fast-approaching wall of swords and shields broke the impetus of the attack and the spirit of the Atrebates.



Belgic view: The goal of the Nervii and their allies had been to overwhelm a single legion, annihilate it and plunder the baggage train before Roman reinforcements could arrive. The disturbing strength of the Roman forces spreading out on the other side of the river dictated that what would have been a large raid now became a full-scale battle. The Atrebates made up the eastern flank of the attack, with the Viromandui in the centre and the Nervii on the western flank. Roman cavalry and light infantry had taken the southern bank of the river but had not dared to venture into the woods – the same woods that now disgorged hordes of Belgic warriors drawn up for battle. The Roman horsemen and slingers were chased off at once and the tribes pounded their way across the river, up the muddy banks and then on up the slope towards the Roman positions. Fit as they were, the men of the Atrebates were hard-pressed by the speed and difficulty of their advance, and it must have come as a severe shock to find solid ranks of legionaries where they expected to see panic and disorder. At less than 20m they were showered with the long iron

shanks of *pila* that punched through their shields and the men behind them. As the Roman line began to move towards them the Atrebates would try to fall back the way they had come, but there was much ground between them and the relative safety of the woods.



A Romano-Gallic prick-spur. This small bronze spur, inlaid in silver, was found in Paris in the River Seine. It was secured to the heel of the rider by means of a strap attached to two side-buttons (missing on this example). An extra strap passed through the heel's hook (shaped like a horse's head) before going around the ankle, to ensure that it would not move. In antiquity, spurs were not used in pairs, but rather as a single accessory attached to only one of the feet and were used, as they are today, for directing a horse to move forwards. Like the four-horned saddle, it is likely that the prick-spur originated among Celtic cavalry before its adoption by the Romans. (metmuseum.org/Wikimedia/CC0 1.0)

Now the barbarians' manner of fighting, being in large measure that of wild beasts and frenzied, was an erratic procedure, quite lacking in military science. Thus, at one moment they would raise their swords aloft and smite after the manner of wild boars, throwing the whole weight of their bodies into the blow like hewers of wood or men digging with mattocks, and again they would deliver crosswise blows aimed at no target, as if they intended to cut to pieces the entire bodies of their adversaries, protective armour and all; then they would turn the edges of their swords away from the foe. (Dionysius, *RA* 14.10.17)

Against these frenzied tactics the best defence was discipline, cohesion and tight ranks, enabling Legio XI and Legio VIII to press the Viromandui back to the banks of the Sabis.

The individual nature of the legions' battles, inevitable though it was, was far from ideal, with the ground held being a reflection of the terrain and the exigencies of the moment rather than any coherent plan. The relatively wide dispersal of the legions was exacerbated by pre-existing Belgic abatis that blocked lines of sight from one position to another, making the allocation of reserves, not to mention any attempt at coherent unified command, nigh on impossible. The success of Legio XI and Legio VIII in pushing the Viromandui back towards the Sabis may have been a local success, but the advance of the legions opened up a large gap in the line that exposed the encampment and the Roman southern flank, held by Legio XII and Legio VII. It was here that the largest Belgic contingent, the Nervii, led by Boduognatus, was pressing forward with its attack.

The densely packed Belgic ranks threatened to turn the southernmost flank of the Roman position, while at the same time penetrating through the outer works of the camp. The Roman allied cavalry and light infantry, having withdrawn to the camp in the wake of their earlier defeat at the river, were panicked by the arrival of the Nervii, causing them to break once again and flee the field. They were joined by numerous camp followers as well as many of the attendants from the arriving baggage-train who fled in all directions, the whole scene an ecstasy of panic and confusion. Amid this evolving disaster Caesar arrived and found his two southern legions extremely hard-pressed by the enemy:

... the men of the Twelfth Legion, with their standards collected in one place, so closely packed that they hampered each other for fighting. All the centurions of the fourth cohort had been slain, and the standard-bearer likewise, and the standard was lost; almost all the centurions of the other cohorts were either wounded or killed ... The rest of the men were tiring, and some of the rearmost ranks, abandoning the fight, were retiring to avoid the missiles; the enemy were not ceasing to move upwards in front from the lower ground, and were pressing hard on either flank. (Caesar, *CBG* 2.25)

Caesar grabbed a shield and pushed his way to the first line, calling out to his centurions by name, exhorting them to broaden the frontage of their formations to allow for better use of their swords. His presence right in the thick of the fight had a revivifying effect on the legionaries, and helped to

check somewhat the advance of the Nervii. The whole situation on the southern flank was perilous, and though Caesar had stabilized Legio XII for the moment, Legio VII was also being hard-pressed, and the risk of envelopment was still very real. Taking stock of his plight, Caesar ordered Legio VII to move towards Legio XII; when they were close enough Legio VII wheeled around, creating a box in which the legions were fighting back-to-back. The manoeuvre heartened the men of both legions, giving them the confidence that they would not be taken unawares in the flank of the rear, and encouraged them to continue with the battle.

Two factors now played into Caesar's favour. First, the panicked camp followers had alerted the two legions bringing up the rear of the column (Legio XIII and Legio XIV) as to the urgency of the situation ahead, and they came forward as fast as they could. Second, Titus Labienus, from his vantage point in the captured Belgic camp, could see how seriously the southern wing needed help, and he immediately dispatched Legio X to re-cross the Sabis and attack the Nervii in the rear. The arrival of these much-needed reinforcements from two directions heartened the whole Roman position, with the wounded, the camp followers and even the twice-disgraced cavalry rejoining the fight. Dionysius of Halicarnassus gave a description of the fighting techniques that the legionaries employed against the Gauls in such a battle:

... the Romans' defence and counter-manoeuving against the barbarians was steadfast and afforded great safety. For while their foes were still raising their swords aloft, they would duck under their arms, holding up their shields, and then, stooping and crouching low, they would render vain and useless the blows of the others, which were aimed too high, while for their own part, holding their swords straight out, they would strike their opponents in the groins, pierce their sides, and drive their blows through their breasts into their vitals. And if they saw any of them keeping these parts of their bodies protected, they would cut the tendons of their knees or ankles and topple them to the ground roaring and biting their shields and uttering cries resembling the howling of wild beasts. (Dionysius, *RA* 14.10.19)



A depiction of the god Mars in the raiment of a Roman officer from the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus, dated to the last decades of the 1st century BC. Like the infantry or centurions, tribunes and legates would wear armour and clothing befitting their rank; the example shown here wears what looks like a *linothorax* (a traditional style of Graeco-Roman armour made from layers of glued linen, with an integral double set of *pteruges* (defensive strips attached to the armour) that offered protection to the lower torso and upper thighs), and a *paludamentum* (a cloak that was a sign of high status and which was worn attached by a *fibula* (brooch) from the shoulder). The *lorica plumata* (a shirt of overlapping feather-like scales, expensive to produce and maintain) may have been worn by senior officers, but judging from the amount of surviving iconography the *lorica musculata* (a sculpted 'muscle' cuirass, made from bronze or hardened boiled leather and often decorated with embossed figures or scenes) most certainly was. (Jastrow/Wikimedia/**CC0 1.0**)

Caesar recorded how, despite the undeniable shift in their fortunes, the Nervii refused to retreat from the fight: 'When their front ranks had fallen, the

next stood on the prostrate forms and fought from them; when these were cast down, and the corpses were piled up in heaps, the survivors, standing as it were upon a mound, hurled darts on our troops, or caught and returned our [*pila*]' (Caesar, *CBG* 2.27). The slaughter was enormous, with the fighting power of the Nervii almost completely destroyed on the banks of the Sabis, and their allies the Atrebates and the Viromandui faring little better. The Roman victory was pretty much complete, but it had been a very close-run thing. The Roman southern wing had come within a hair's breadth of being overwhelmed, in which case the whole army would likely have been annihilated. The Roman losses, though not mentioned by Caesar, must have been considerable, certainly as bad as at Bibracte the year before, and most likely worse. The remnants of the Nervii and their allies were allowed to return to their own territories in an example of Caesarean magnanimity, being no threat to Rome anymore.

For the Atuatuca, who had not been able to join up with the other Belgic tribes in time for the campaign, missing the battle did not save them from a bitter end. Caesar quickly moved on their *oppidum* and invested it; the Atuatuca, fearing the results of a siege but not wanting to relinquish their weapons in surrender, indicated that they would give up but then launched an abortive attempt to break out. The result was the storming and overthrow of their city by Roman forces, with the entire surviving population of 54,000 sold off into slavery for their bad faith.

Alesia

August–October 52 BC

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Caesar's success against the Belgae was complemented by Publius Licinius Crassus's campaign along the Atlantic coast, leaving Gaul hemmed in by Rome to the east and west. The following year saw the uprising of the sea-going Veneti, who were crushed in a naval engagement by Caesar's legate Decimus Iunius Brutus Albinus, and further campaigns against two as-yet untamed Belgic tribes, the Morini and the Menapii, who avoided defeat by finding refuge in the deep forests of the north. After brief campaigns in Illyricum and against some interloping Germanic tribes in 55 BC, Caesar struck out across the channel and invaded Britannia with a little over two legions, coming back the following year with a more substantial force and defeating the local power in the south-east, the Catuvellauni. Upon his return to Gaul he was met by yet another uprising, this one by the Belgae and the Treveri led by Ambiorix of the Eburones; Ambiorix had enjoyed some real success, surrounding and virtually destroying Legio XIII and five cohorts of fresh recruits – an act which threatened Rome's (and particularly Caesar's) prestige and encouraged the Nervii to take up arms once again – but winter soon drew campaigning to a close. The year 53 BC saw Caesar return to the north with a vengeance, beating down all opposition on both sides of the Rhene as well as breaking the Senones and the Carnutes. His return south did not leave a peaceful province in his wake, however; by winter trouble was clearly brewing, with the *oppidum* of Cenabum (modern-day Orléans) attacked and its entire Roman community slaughtered, the signal for the opening of a new and widespread revolt against Roman rule.



A votive statuette representing a wild boar from the La Tène culture, found at Sarka, Bohemia in the Czech Republic. Boars were a common cultural and religious motif across the whole Celtic world, with no shortage of archaeological examples having been found from Asia Minor through to the Atlantic coast. Many were commonly used as crests attached to helmets (together with other striking items such as metal birds and horns), but also probably mounted on standards; and similar designs have also been found on shields, a notable example being the outline of a boar that can be seen on the face of the Witham bronze shield, held by the British Museum. (DEA/A. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini via Getty Images)



A scene on Trajan's Column showing Roman cavalry crossing a bridge in Dacia. The role of the cavalry varied according to the type of troops employed and the nature of the campaign, but in general they would be expected to scout ahead and screen the army, to combat the enemy's cavalry during battle, to harry the flanks and rear of the enemy's infantry formations, and to pursue and cut down broken and routed units. Caesar's cavalry levies in the early years of the war, drawn from Gallic allied tribes and his provinces, were much like those of their

Gallic opponents: warriors who were highly capable as individuals but who were not necessarily trained to operate as part of a disciplined unit. The reliability of his horsemen improved when he began recruiting from the Germanic tribes. (Ann Ronan Pictures/Print Collector/Getty Images)

The uprisings of 52 BC, led by a young warrior of the Averni known as Vercingetorix, would prove to be the most serious that Caesar would encounter, with almost the entirety of Gaul up in arms against him. His charisma drew other warriors to him, and his fighting style, which evolved into mostly avoiding pitched battles in favour of manoeuvre and 'Fabian tactics' (i.e. wearing out one's opponent through attrition), were better thought-out than those of most warlords and proved to be annoyingly effective against the Romans. He gained the confidence of the tribal leaders, who voted him the position of commander for their combined armies; he raised a force of around 80,000 men from a number of tribes, a serious threat to any Roman army, even one as large as Caesar's. Against this the Roman army (initially scattered among several winter quarters) was now 12 legions strong and supplemented by various auxiliaries, the most important of which was Caesar's contingent of Germanic cavalry, the reliability and professionalism of which would contrast most favourably with the Gallic levies of the early war years.



A model of the Roman siege works before the walls of Avaricum at the museum of the United States Military Academy, West Point. Avaricum was the largest *oppidum* of the Bituriges, and one of the best-defended Gallic cities, with only one viable approach for an attacker. The investment required complex, backbreaking and difficult engineering work, and despite sallies by the Gauls that attempted to burn down the *agger* and siege towers, after a month of work the Romans launched a massed assault on the dispirited defenders. The city's resistance crumbled almost as soon as the Romans were over the wall, when the bloodletting began in earnest; only 800 of Avaricum's reputed 40,000 inhabitants escaped the ensuing massacre.
(Rolf Müller/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

Caesar began his campaign in earnest after he united his army at Agedincum in early April; he lost no time both in pursuing Vercingetorix and pacifying centres of resistance, first moving against Vellaunodunum and forcing its capitulation within four days, taking Cenabum three days later, and Noviodunum five days after that. Three days and 90km later he reached Avaricum, which proved to be a much more formidable prospect, forcing Caesar to invest the *oppidum* with complex siege works that took a month to work their way over the town's walls, victory coming on 25 May. Vercingetorix had caught up with Caesar at Avaricum, but did not march on him, instead shadowing the movements of the Roman army, the two sides dancing around one another while the siege ground down to its grim end. He had learned that there was little chance of defeating a Roman army in open battle, so instead he adapted his tactics, denying the Romans food and forage by destroying everything in their path. This did not dissuade Caesar from continuing with his strategy of pacification: despatching Titus Labienus with a portion of his army (four legions) to campaign against the Senones and the Parisii, Caesar moved the rest of his force against Gergovia, arriving on 18 June, only to find Vercingetorix already there. The Gaul hadn't wanted to defend Avaricum, but Gergovia – his tribal capital – was another matter.



A monument at Gergovia built to the memory of Vercingetorix, sited on the plateau of the central massif and overlooking the town of Clermont-Ferrand, 6km distant. Caesar's army moved on Gergovia with great alacrity, soon investing it, but unlike at Avaricum the outcome was far from ideal. Effective relief from Vercingetorix broke the Roman stranglehold on the city, forcing Caesar to fall back after losing 700 men, abandoning the siege and retreating to the north-east on 20 July. It was the last great Gallic victory of the Gallic Wars. (Photo12/UIG/Getty Images)

Gergovia was set on a tall plateau, an imposing and highly defensible location. Caesar, seeing that it would be foolhardy to attempt an assault, opted instead to cut off the *oppidum* from its sources of water and forage. He was in the process of securing the small hills at the base of the citadel when word reached him that the Aedui, oldest of the Roman Gallic allies, were wavering. Caesar left immediately with half his force (four legions), only to be greeted on his return with news that Vercingetorix had attacked one of the Roman camps, nearly overrunning it, and had recaptured one of the hills at the base of Gergovia. Caesar quickly organized an attack to retake the lost hill, but his initial success was soon checked by the Gauls, who counter-attacked the over-extended and exhausted Roman attackers, throwing them back with heavy losses, 700 men and 46 centurions being killed in the battle. As there was now no prospect of bringing Gergovia down, Caesar broke camp and moved off towards his supply base at Noviodunum, only to discover that it had been sacked by the Aedui. Caesar understood the seriousness of his situation, and made haste to rejoin his force with that of

Titus Labienus after the latter's successful campaign against the Parisii and the Senones, meeting up with him at Agedincum on 5 August. His army had been beaten and pursued by Vercingetorix after Gergovia, but now at full strength and keen to regain the initiative, Caesar turned back once more, heading for the territory of the Sequani.

Alesia, August–October 52 BC

MAP KEY

1 Late August: Vercingetorix has retreated to the highly defensible *oppidum* of Alesia, but Caesar, rather than risk an almost impossible attack, lays siege. He establishes a wall of contravallation (the inner ring) to keep Vercingetorix and his Gauls trapped on their hilltop, and a wall of circumvallation (the outer ring) to thwart any attempts at relief by external forces, both fortifications being more or less complete by early October.

2 13–17 October: A massive Gallic army arrives soon after Caesar's fortifications are established. A major cavalry engagement develops on the western plain, but the Romans gain the upper hand, leaving the Gauls dispirited. Two days later a further assault is launched, this time under cover of darkness, and with coordinated assaults on the inner and outer walls of the western fortifications. After much effort the Gauls are forced to retreat.

3 Midday, 18 October: An elite Gallic force (up to 60,000 men strong) under the command of Vercassivellaunus launches a surprise attack against what turns out to be one of the weakest sections of the Roman defences, the camp that anchors the north-western section of Caesar's line. Vercingetorix launches concurrent sorties against the same sections of the line, putting the Romans under desperate pressure. Caesar despatches his most trusted adjutant Titus Labienus together with six cohorts to try to stem the Gallic flood.

4 Late afternoon, 18 October: Caesar personally leads a counter-attack of four cohorts against the Gauls tearing at the

defences of his north-western camp. At the same time the majority of his Germanic cavalry have slipped out of the circumvallation, manoeuvring behind Vercassivellaunus's Gauls and charging them in the rear. The twin blows break the Gallic resolve, and the relief army is routed, fleeing back to its encampments in the south-west pursued by Caesar's horsemen.

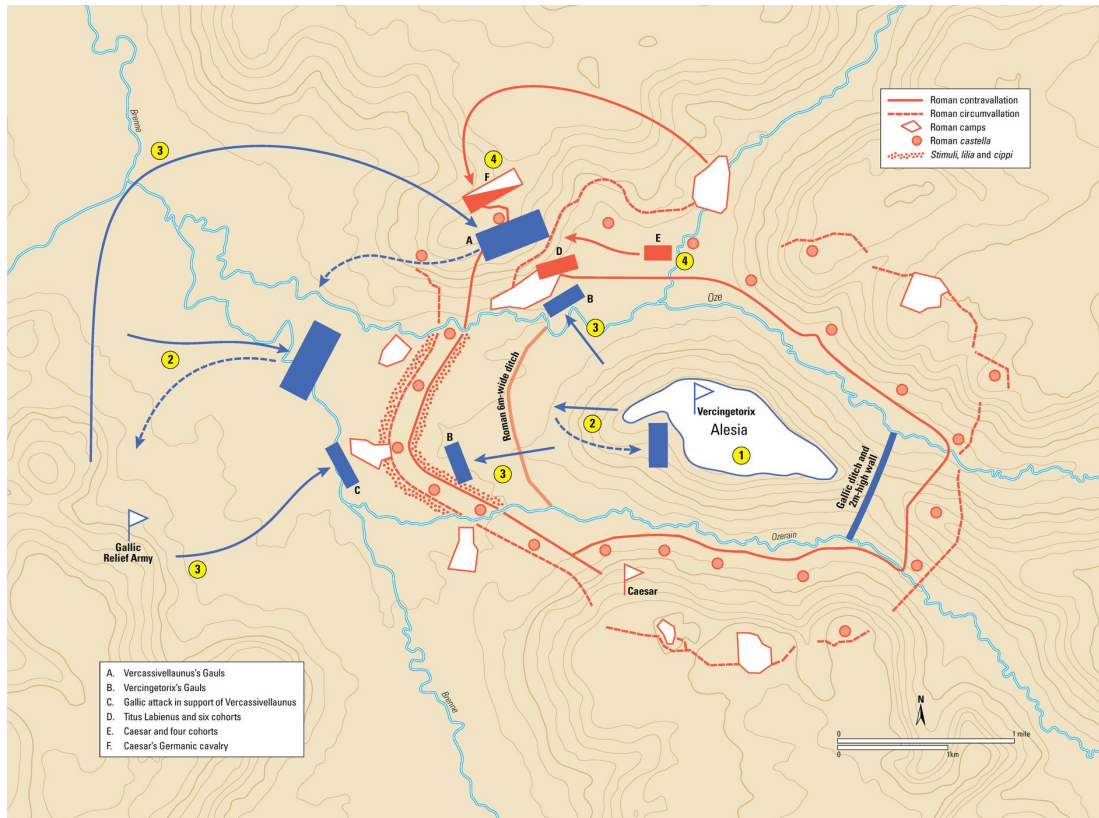
Battlefield environment

The *oppidum* of Alesia lay upon a high plateau closely surrounded on three sides by a ring of hills of equivalent height; the plateau's base was circumscribed by rivers on its northern and southern sides (unnamed by Caesar, they are known today as the Oze and Ozerain respectively). The Gauls had blocked the eastern approach to Alesia with a ditch and 2m-tall stone wall; the only other practicable approach was from the west-north-west, where a relatively flat plain stretched out from the plateau's lower slopes for 4.5km. Caesar's blockade consisted of a 6m-wide ditch that stretched from the Oze to the Ozerain, with the whole plateau surrounded by a 16.3km inner wall and 20.7km outer wall (the former to keep Vercingetorix in, the latter to keep Vercassivellaunus out). Both inner and outer walls took the shape of wooden palisades set atop earthen ramparts, reaching an overall height of 3.55m; the walls were fronted by ditches (the western section of the inner wall by two V-shaped ditches each 4.44m wide and 2.37m deep, one of which was partially flooded). A series of at least eight encampments anchored the two sets of walls, supported by 23 *castella* (forts) and numerous watchtowers set 24m apart; the approaches to the western stretch of both the inner and outer walls were laced with *stimuli* ('spurs': barbed iron spikes sticking out of the earth) and *lilia* ('lilies': camouflaged pits fitted with sharpened wooden stakes), the earthworks being studded with *cippi* ('gravestones': rows of sharpened stakes). The investment began sometime in

August and went on until 18 October, so the weather must have been changeable, although Caesar makes no particular mention of this.



A modern reconstruction of a stretch of Roman fortifications at Alesia, located in the Archéodrome de Beaune at Merceuil in eastern France. The watchtowers are possibly too robustly constructed, but taken together with the palisade, ditch and the earthwork they give a good sense of how imposing an obstacle such a fortification would present to an enemy with scant engineering capability and poor logistics. This reconstruction also has *cervi* ('deer antlers': sharpened branches similar to *cippi*) fixed in the earthwork, with *lilia* peppering the approaches, both of which would disrupt the cohesion of any attack. Though they were likely not fully complete by the time of the battle, the wall of contravallation (the inner ring) stretched for 11 Roman miles (16.3km), while the wall of circumvallation (the outer ring) ran for 14 Roman miles (20.7km). (Christophel Fine Art/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



INTO COMBAT

The aftermath of Gergovia had seen Caesar withdraw north-east towards the land of the Sequani, something that Vercingetorix took as a good omen. With his forces encamped 15km from the Romans, he quickly called all his cavalry commanders together, stating that if Caesar were allowed to leave, it would only be at best a brief pause in the war as he would certainly return once he had reinforced his army. Vercingetorix proposed a raid on the Roman column while it proceeded on its march, the objective being to strip it of its baggage – an act that would be tactically damaging and, perhaps more importantly, deeply humiliating for the whole army. His plan was met with roars of approval: ‘The horsemen shouted with one accord that they should be bound by a most solemn oath – that no man should be received beneath a roof, nor have access to children, or to parents, or to wife, who had not twice ridden through the enemy’s column’ (Caesar, *CBG* 7.66). In the event, the Roman column proved a rather tougher nut to crack than the Gauls had anticipated. Caesar’s Germanic cavalry gave a fine account of themselves, and the baggage, withdrawn behind lines of legionaries who refused to retreat,

proved to be out of reach. The day gradually turned against the Gauls, with Caesar's horsemen outflanking and then destroying the Gallic cavalry, most of whom fled to avoid being massacred.

Such a reverse was a severe blow to Vercingetorix, who, like most Gauls, put much stock in the valour of his horsemen; now he found himself devoid of cavalry and facing a revived Roman army augmented by Titus Labienus's four legions that were pursuing him with speed and aggression, 3,000 men of his rearguard having already fallen in their attempts to fend off Caesar.

Vercingetorix quickly ordered his forces to fall back to the nearby *oppidum* of Alesia, a highly defensible town set atop a plateau with few avenues of approach. As soon as Caesar saw the new Gallic position it was clear to him that it could not be taken by storm, but rather than withdraw he chose to blockade the rebellious Gauls inside. Alesia may have seemed like a sanctuary at first, but Caesar's industrious engineers were slowly turning it into a mountaintop prison, building two walls supported by earthworks, entrenchments, forts, watchtowers and any number of other devices from the art of siege warfare.

Knowledge of the plight of Vercingetorix and his army had spread far and wide as Caesar's army slowly tightened its noose around Alesia. To relieve him a council of Gallic chieftains came together and agreed to assemble an army drawn from all the rebelling tribes, each of which would provide a contingent rather than a levy of all who could bear arms, the objective being to create a manageable force that could be organized and supplied effectively. The Gallic relief army was to be jointly commanded by Commius of the Atrebates, Viridomarus and Eboracorex of the Aedui, and Vercassivellaunus of the Arverni. It was 250,000 men strong, with 8,000 cavalry. Word of the mighty host soon reached the besieged Gauls at Alesia, giving them cause to hope.

Soon enough the day that the reinforcements were expected to arrive came and went, and not too long after that the grain also ran out. Vercingetorix called a council of war; discussion included the possibility of surrendering, or perhaps a sortie while the strength of their army was still vigorous, but in the end the council, appreciating the difficulties their force was going to face with so many mouths to feed, took the rather ungallant step of expelling all the useless mouths from Alesia, including its original inhabitants the Mandubii, assuming that the Romans would either feed them or let them pass through their lines and move on elsewhere: Caesar did neither, condemning

the Gallic civilians to suffer in a starving limbo between the plateau and the contravallation – a situation that would not be alleviated until those who remained in Alesia surrendered.



A section of a finely decorated Celtic scabbard. Though there is some evidence of leather scabbards with metal frames and fittings, scabbards were typically made entirely of metal (Pleiner 1993: 154). They were fitted with a metal bracket on their reverse side, through which an iron chain was looped that was in turn attached to the wearer's belt; swords seem to have usually been worn on the right hip. Over and above the swords they protected, scabbards could often be works of art in their own right, and were an undoubted indicator of their bearer's status. (Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

The Gallic relief army, meanwhile, had finally arrived. Led by its four chieftains it quickly established itself on a south-western hill less than 1.5km from the Roman fortifications. The following day it arrayed itself for battle on the western plain, with its ranks of cavalry in the vanguard and the vast swathes of its infantry positioned further back on higher ground. The imposing sight caused immediate celebration in Alesia, with the defenders rushing forth in battle array, carrying fascines that, together with loose earth,

they used to fill in the Roman ditch in anticipation of rushing across it into battle. With the gauntlet thrown down, the Romans went into action: 'Caesar disposed the whole army on both faces of the entrenchments in such fashion that, if occasion should arise, each man could know and keep his proper station; then he ordered the cavalry to be brought out of camp and to engage' (Caesar, *CBG* 7.80).

As the two cavalry forces moved against each other the Romans were surprised to find that the Gauls had seeded the ranks of their horsemen with archers and light infantry to give them cover in the event that the cavalry had to retreat, but also to help break up any Roman charges. The tactic bore fruit, with numbers of Caesar's Germanic horsemen withdrawing from the battle wounded, resulting in thunderous cheers from the Gallic spectators on both sides of the walls. Caesar recounted how

As the action was proceeding in sight of all, and no deed, of honour or dishonour, could escape notice, both sides were stirred to courage by desire of praise and fear of disgrace. The fight lasted, and the victory was doubtful, from noon almost to sunset; then the Germans in one part of the field massed their troops of horse, charged the enemy and routed them, and when they had been put to flight the archers were surrounded and slain. Likewise, from the other parts of the field, our troops pursued the retreating enemy right up to their camp, giving them no chance of rallying. (Caesar, *CBG* 7.80)

The heaving ranks of Gauls that stood by the Roman trench and lined the slopes of Alesia were utterly downcast by a defeat they did not expect and which, despite having seemed so close, turned out to be an unequivocal Roman victory. They retreated back behind the walls of their *oppidum*, dispirited.

After a day of rest the Gauls made another attempt at midnight, advancing silently under cover of darkness towards the Roman fortifications on the western plain. They had equipped themselves with great numbers of hurdles, ladders and grappling hooks, and announcing their arrival to those besieged behind the walls with a great war cry, the Gauls leapt forward. The great number of their missile weapons gave them an initial advantage, but this dwindled as they came closer to the fortifications, Cassius Dio recording how

they tried to enter the city by night through the wall of circumvallation, but met with dire disaster; for the Romans had dug secret pits in the places which were passable

for horses and had fixed stakes in them, afterward making the whole resemble on the surface the surrounding ground; thus horse and man, falling into them absolutely without warning, came to grief. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 11.40)

The weight of the attack seems, however, to have driven it through the *lilia* and *cippi*, with the hurdles and scaling equipment employed against the outer wall, while a concurrent assault was reaching the same section of the inner wall, launched by Vercingetorix as soon as he heard the great shout raised by Vercassivellaunus's relieving Gauls.

Caesar noted that 'Our troops, as on previous days, moved each to his appointed station in the entrenchments; with slings, one-pounders [light ballistae], stakes set ready inside the works, and bullets, they beat off the Gauls. As the darkness made it impossible to see far, many wounds were received on both sides' (Caesar, *CBG* 7.81). The commanders responsible for that section of the defences, Marcus Antonius and Gaius Trebonius, drew reinforcements from forts and sent them in to bolster hard-pressed areas, thus ensuring that the integrity of both the inner and outer walls was maintained. Many Gauls fell victim to Roman booby traps, as well as from *scorpio* bolts and other missiles launched from the rampart and watchtower turrets. The Gauls 'perished on every side. Many a man was wounded, but the entrenchment was nowhere penetrated; and when daybreak drew nigh, fearing that they might be surrounded on their exposed flank by a sortie from the camps above them, they retired to their comrades' (Caesar, *CBG* 7.82). Vercingetorix's men sallying forth from Alesia had equipped themselves with fascines and bundles of brush with which to fill in the broad ditch that blocked their path, but the work went too slowly and as dawn arrived and their compatriots outside withdrew, they found themselves forced to retreat as well.

Two attempts had been made on the Roman fortifications, and both had failed. What was more neither of the attacks had seemed to put undue pressure on the Roman defences. Another strategy was called for. The four main Gallic chieftains came together to discuss the best way forward, taking counsel from local tribesmen about the lie of the land and how the Romans had constructed their works upon it. Through such a process a potential weakness was found: on the north-western side a large hill had proved too substantial an object for Caesar's engineers to include within his defences. His men had been forced to build their walls along the gentle slopes at the hill's base, giving any attack from that angle an advantage of height over the

defenders. Further reconnaissance confirmed that the Roman works on the north-western side were not as robust or as deep as those on the western plain.



A *stater* (a Greek-style coin common in antiquity) made of electrum and bearing the name of Vercingetorix, discovered in 1852 in the Puy de Dôme and now in the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon. The likeness is almost certainly an idealized image of a god (possibly Maponos, the divine son) rather than Vercingetorix himself; the coin's reverse shows a prancing stallion, a common motif among the horse-proud tribes of central and southern Gaul. Vercingetorix was playing a dangerous game in trying to unite disparate tribal authority in his own hands in a culture that had rejected kingship – his own father had tried to revive monarchical rule and been executed for his trouble. Vercingetorix, however, had not just his own charisma but the existential threat Rome posed to Gallic society as a spur to his ambitions. (Alain Basset, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 4.0**)

A plan of attack was quickly drawn up; the operation would consist of a two-pronged assault set for noon on the following day (18 October). The bulk of the Gallic army including all its horse would make its way towards the western approaches once more, threatening the main camp that anchored that section of the Roman line, while another force would launch a simultaneous surprise attack on the north-western section of the fortifications. It was reasonable to expect that Vercingetorix, seeing an attack developing against the outer walls, would launch his own assaults against the same sections of the inner walls to maximize the pressure felt by the Romans, much as he had done during the night attack the day before. Vercassivellaunus, one of the army's four commanders and a kinsman of Vercingetorix, was given the honour of leading the northern assault; his force would consist of 60,000 men, hand-picked from the bravest of the Gallic tribes, and equipped with the

tools they would need to scale the Roman defences and tear down their wicker walls and watchtowers. Leaving the Gallic camp under cover of darkness, Vercassivellaunus and his men made their way in a broad loop around the western plain, coming to rest just behind the large hill that disrupted the Roman defences in the north-west of their line. There they settled down to recuperate and prepare for the sun to reach its zenith.

Soon enough the western plain was covered with parading Gauls, their cavalry charging towards the outer wall, while Vercassivellaunus and his horde burst from their position of concealment and moved with great speed towards the north-west section of the wall. As expected, as soon as Vercingetorix observed the developing attacks, ‘he moved out of the town, taking with him the hurdles, poles, mantlets, grappling-hooks, and all the other appliances prepared for the sally’ (Caesar, *CBG* 7.84), his men striking to the west and the north-west in support of the main assaults. Fighting quickly developed along the western and northern sides of the walls, sorely testing the thinly stretched legionaries who were particularly unnerved by the sounds of battle going on behind them, but about which they could do nothing except rely on the steadfastness of their comrades.

Caesar invests his account of the battle with heightened drama, with each side understanding that this was its last chance to secure victory, something that may not have been too far from the truth considering the size of the forces committed to the battle. The section of the line that Vercassivellaunus was attacking was under the control of the legates Gaius Antistius Reginus and Gaius Caninius Rebilus; though they each had one legion at their command, they were seriously outnumbered by the Gauls. In addition, the fact that they were advancing down a slope towards the Roman wall allowed some of the Gauls to launch showers of arrows and javelins from favourable positions, while others formed themselves into a *testudo* and moved against the fortifications; ‘fresh men quickly replaced the exhausted. Earth cast by the [Gallic soldiers] over the entrenchments gave the Gauls a means of ascent and at the same time covered over the appliances which the Romans had concealed in the ground; and our troops had now neither arms nor strength enough’ (Caesar, *CBG* 7.85).

The Gallic *testudo* at Alesia



Vercassivellaunus, kinsman to Vercingetorix, has been given the task of ripping a hole through Caesar's defences once and for all. The previous two assaults had come to nothing but a bloody mess, so this time a careful reconnaissance was conducted by scouts led by local farmers who probed the Roman lines, searching for that one spot that was most susceptible to a concentrated strike. On the north-western stretch of the circumvallation one camp had been established on the lower slopes of the high ground that anchored that sector, a decision that would give Vercassivellaunus his chance. Having assembled the best warriors from among the besieging Gallic army's tribes, the force (numbering many thousands) marched around the northern flank of the Roman position on the hill, appearing on the high ground in front of the camp. As the Gauls broke from cover and began their advance they showered the Romans manning the watchtowers with arrows and javelins, the high ground giving them an advantage in range. Proving that the Romans were not the only ones who could learn from their enemies, the columns of Gauls assembled into dense *testudo* formations, interlocking their shields in front, at the sides and over their heads, creating a

mass of men virtually invulnerable to the Roman archers and slingers (if not the artillerists) positioned on the earthen ramparts. Using this new tactical formation, the Gauls slowly covered the ground to the wall, neutralizing all the Roman defences as they went. By the time afternoon reached its height the vanguards of the Gallic columns had ground their way into the very teeth of the Roman rampart – a potentially fatal dagger-thrust through Caesar's line that had to be stopped at all costs.

Caesar had positioned himself to ensure that he could see what was happening across the whole of the battle, and it quickly became clear to him that Vercassivellaunus's attack was the most urgent threat. He despatched Titus Labienus with six cohorts to offer immediate support to the buckling section, ordering him to hold if possible but as a last resort to pull all the defending cohorts out of the camp and fight his way out, a sign of how serious the battle in the north had become. Positioned as they were between the two rings of entrenchments, Caesar's army had the benefit of interior lines when operating against both Vercingetorix's force at Alesia and the Gauls on the western plain; but the legions had a great deal of terrain to defend, and if the Gauls applied enough pressure on multiple points for enough time, the strain would be too much. The line would break. Personal exhortations by Caesar helped bolster the men's morale, but the pressure continued to build, with Vercingetorix's Gauls redoubling their efforts to break through their encircling prison:

The enemy on the inner side, despairing of success on the level ground, because of the size of the entrenchments, made an attempt to scale the precipitous parts, conveying thither the appliances they had prepared. They dislodged the defenders of the turrets by a swarm of missiles, filled in the trenches with earth and hurdles, tore down rampart and breastwork with grappling-hooks. (Caesar, *CBG* 7.86)

Reinforcements of six cohorts were sent at once, followed by a second wave of seven cohorts, but the savagery of the fighting did not abate, forcing Caesar himself to take command of a relief column of cohorts and join in the battle; his presence and the extra legionaries eventually made the difference, stabilizing the situation and ensuring that the worst of Vercingetorix's attack was beaten back.

With the wall of contravallation secured, Caesar turned his attention back to the north-western circumvallation where Vercassivellaunus's Gauls were causing such havoc. The defences there had been mostly overwhelmed by the Gallic tactics, their numbers and aggression, with neither the earthworks nor the ditches able to stem their advance. Titus Labienus was holding on, but with difficulty; aside from the existing forces at his disposal he had added 11 more cohorts from a nearby camp, but by this stage he may well have been fighting in the 'safe' ground between the inner and outer walls. He sent a messenger to Caesar with a description of the circumstances he was facing, and what he thought needed to be done.



A representation of Roman legionaries in a *testudo* ('tortoise') formation, Trajan's Column in Rome. Though closely associated with the Roman legions, there are several accounts of Gauls using the same formation when approaching enemy fortifications, most notably by Vercassivellaunus's picked assault force on the last day of battle at Alesia. Gallic shields came in a variety of styles and shapes, and though they lacked the probable uniformity of the Roman *scutum* they were large enough to protect a warrior from shoulder to shin, and would have been effective when employed in a *testudo* formation. (CM Dixon/Heritage Images/Getty Images)

Wasting no time, Caesar ordered four cohorts of infantry from the nearest fort together with a portion of the cavalry to follow him; the remainder of the cavalry he instructed to leave the Roman lines and circle around behind the

Gallic position, so as to attack them from the rear. Caesar, clearly identifiable in his commander's cloak, led his four cohorts and cavalry contingent straight towards Titus Labienus and the heart of the battle. The Gauls, with their better vantage point on the high ground north of the outer wall, could clearly observe the arrival of Caesar and his reinforcements, a sight which encouraged them to redouble their efforts; 'a shout was raised on both sides, and taken up by an answering shout from the rampart and the whole of the entrenchments' (Caesar, *CBG* 7.88), as both sides came together once again. The sudden appearance of Caesar's Germanic cavalry approaching the rear of the Gallic host caused consternation and panic to ripple throughout their ranks. At around the same time the pressure from the four new cohorts began to tell; the legionaries, having discarded their *pila*, instead closed in with their *gladii*, and this new assault coupled with the cavalry threat to their rear caused the Gauls to fall back. Unfortunately, their path to safety lay through Caesar's fast-approaching Germanic horsemen, who crashed into the Gauls' disorganized lines, wreaking mayhem among them.



A detail from Plate E of the Gundestrup cauldron showing a trio of *carnyx* players. Caesar notes that during the Gallic relief army's night attack on the western defences, a 'trumpet' blast

– almost certainly the roar of *carnyxes* – was used by Vercingetorix as the signal for his own forces to attack the corresponding section of the wall of circumvallation (Caesar, *CBG* 7.81).
(Bloodofox/Wikimedia/[CC BY-SA 3.0](#))



A Roman bronze statuette of a Gallic prisoner (presumably of some status considering his unusual mail shirt and raiment), c.1st century AD. (CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)

The rout quickly descended into a slaughter, with 74 Gallic war standards captured, together with Vercassivellaunus himself. Vercingetorix's men, seeing the disaster unfold before them, abandoned their attempts to overwhelm the contravallation's entrenchments and retreated back to their fastness on the plateau. As soon as news of the scattering and destruction of the northern force reached the main body of the Gallic relief army, it broke camp and retreated in relative safety, Caesar's men being too worn out to engage in any sort of immediate pursuit.

The Gallic collapse was near total, as much a defeat of the spirit as of the flesh. The men at Alesia were taken into captivity, many of those from the relief army hunted down and scattered. Despite the fact that it would take two

more years of campaigning, Caesar's domination of Gaul was all but assured by his victory at Alesia. Vercingetorix had come very close, perhaps as close as Boduognatus had at the Sabis five years earlier, to breaking Roman power in Gaul, but the flexibility, speed, discipline and engineering prowess of the legions had withstood him. Vercingetorix surrendered to Caesar, but his hopes for mercy were met with chains and captivity, the final blow falling some years later. After being paraded through the streets of Rome as the prize exhibit in Caesar's Gallic Triumph, he was taken away and quietly strangled, as was the Roman fashion.

Analysis

BIBRACTE

In numerous Roman accounts of their encounters with the Gauls much is made of their ferocity, but also their brittle morale and lack of sophistication in the face of a reverse, exemplified in a description given by Strabo:

The whole race which is now called both 'Gallic' and 'Galatic' is war-mad, and both high-spirited and quick for battle, although otherwise simple and not ill-mannered. And therefore, if roused, they come together all at once for the struggle, both openly and without circumspection, so that for those who wish to defeat them by stratagem they become easy to deal with ... [they] were wont to fall upon their opponents all at once and in great numbers, they were defeated all at once. (Strabo, *Geo.* 4.4.2)

And yet at Bibracte the 'brittleness' of Celtic morale was most notable in the behaviour of the Roman allied cavalry. The Helvetians and their allied tribes set on the Romans in their traditional way, but after the failure of their initial assault, they did not fall back in confusion; rather they stayed and fought. When the legions pushed them down the hill and back across the plain the Helvetians retained their cohesion, allowing them to retreat to a defensible position and continue the battle from there.

The arrival of the Tulingi and Boii rearguard had the potential to transform the battle in favour of the Celts, something that was apparent to both sides; the new arrivals went straight from their route of march into a battle formation, intent on rolling into the exposed Roman flank. For their part the Roman unengaged third line executed a clean manoeuvre, wheeling around to meet the new threat in a demonstration of exactly the sort of battle-saving tactic that could only be accomplished by a well-trained and -disciplined force. This new front of the battle proved to be as hard-fought as the one against the Helvetians, with the eventual Roman victory most likely arising from their proficiency in small-unit tactics, as well as the ability of cohorts to swap out exhausted front-line troops for fresh reserves, thus enabling them to keep up a consistent pressure and tempo of attack that their enemies would not be able to match. There was no rout, however, with Caesar's forces so exhausted by their victory that they could do little more than loot the captured Helvetian baggage.

Having lost the perfect opportunity to attack due to poor communications and bad intelligence, Caesar found the initiative had slipped to the Helvetians. Rather than let such a state of affairs continue, he opted for a defensive battle on well-chosen ground – a sensible move but still hardly an ideal one, with limited options for retreat should the day start to go against him. Caesar's personal behaviour, his bravery and willingness to lead by example that would become a feature of several of the most important battles in the war for Gaul, was first demonstrated at Bibracte. His consciously dramatic act of sending his horse away and standing with his soldiers was a calculated demonstration of leadership, but no less successful because of that.

THE SABIS

From the outset of the campaign against the Belgae, Caesar displayed his characteristic ambition as well as a shrewd strategic grasp of the situation, exemplified by the alacrity of his advance into enemy territory as soon as he had even the ghost of a reason to do so. The speed, engineering skill, professionalism and concentration of Roman tactics were demonstrated in the relief of Bibrax, the business-like investment of the Suessiones at Noviodunum, and the use of the Aedui to wrong-foot the Bellovaci by threatening their poorly defended homelands. In the wake of such a series of victories the refusal of the Nervii to treat with Caesar was all the excuse he needed to push north into their lands and bring them to battle.

Caesar was well aware that he was manoeuvring in hostile territory and that the Nervii were waiting for him somewhere on the other side of the River Sabis, exemplified by his order of march and the concentration of all his veteran legions at the head of the column. Despite this, when it came to securing his position for the day – within sight of enemy cavalry, no less – his only action was to send his own horse across the river to disperse them, while the rest of his force busied itself with setting up the encampment. Legions on the march could deploy into battle lines with little difficulty, and once they were inside the walls of a fortified camp they were safe from most forms of attack; the moment of greatest vulnerability was the time between the march and before the completion of the encampment, when men were scattered far and wide, often unarmoured and distracted with manual labour. Despite the proximity of the enemy Caesar set no guard, and also failed to scout the dense forest on the opposite bank of the Sabis.

The initial alliance of Belgic tribes fell apart through logistical ineptitude and a lack of strategic coherence in the face of a well-practised foe. For their part the Nervii and their associated tribes acted with great courage, both in undertaking a difficult attack across two hillsides bisected by a river, and later when they refused to give way even when the battle had turned against them. It is a matter of conjecture that Boduognatus, expecting to destroy one legion, adapted his plan to a much more ambitious one despite facing an enemy force six times the size of the one he had anticipated. It is quite possible that, having what must have been the majority of the Belgic forces to hand, he saw the potential of attacking the Romans when they presented themselves to him in their most vulnerable state – it was an uncommonly good opportunity. It may be that Caesar accords the Nervii his respect in his account because it gives more value to his eventual victory over them, but throughout his retelling of the battle there is a genuine sense of jeopardy, and the prospect of a Gallic victory was very real.

Victory came to the Romans for several reasons: the ability of individual cohorts and their centurions to do what was necessary without clear orders from above, a result of their campaigning experience, their training and discipline; the capability and initiative of Caesar's subordinate commanders, the most obvious example being Titus Labienus taking it upon himself to redeploy Legio X at a critical point in the battle; and Caesar's own leadership in bolstering the northern wing and then most crucially the hard-pressed southern wing. As it was, Caesar's initial mistakes in his failure to scout the area and properly protect his encampment, serious though they were, did not end in disaster in large part because of his own personal courage, sense of command, and tactical acumen.



An iron *scorio* bolt, held by the Het Valkhof Museum, Nijmegen in the Netherlands. Although larger systems such as *ballistae* (catapults that launched stone balls) were significant machines oriented around siege warfare and thus took time to emplace, assemble and operate, the *scorio* was light, easily transportable, and could be operated by a team of two – useful in attacking or defending a city, but also flexible enough to employ on the battlefield. The Gauls, despite extensive contact with the Greek world over an extended period of time, do not seem to have developed any similar siege weapon systems, perhaps in part because their own experiences of assaulting native Celtic forts or urban centres were more simplistic affairs. (Rabax63/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 4.0**)

ALESIA

Avaricum was a set-piece of Roman siege warfare, while Gergovia demonstrated what could happen when the defenders won the initiative. At Alesia, Caesar's decision to lay siege with walls of contravallation and circumvallation was driven by his understanding that Vercingetorix's position was too strong to assail in the usual manner, but that it was necessary to keep him and his army away from his Gallic reinforcements. In effect Caesar built his fortifications to enable him to defeat two Gallic armies in detail. His decision to lay siege, when his army was smaller and the threat of an enemy relieving force was a looming prospect, was bold indeed. His use of contravallation – usually a conservative tactic – would have been seen as the great gamble it was by his Roman audience, and points to Caesar's actual objective – not the reduction and capture of Alesia, but the destruction of Vercingetorix and his rebel army (Levithan 2013: 138).

The value of the fortifications as a force multiplier for the Romans cannot be overstated. Even if Vercassivellaunus's relief force had been half the size, it might well have still outnumbered Caesar's army, and that was without including Vercingetorix and the thousands under his orders in Alesia itself. The Roman engineers made the best use of the ground they had, with the walls of contravallation and circumvallation, studded with multiple watchtowers, forts, and anchored by a series of camps, allowing Caesar to manage both sides of the siege at the same time. The failing of the defences in the north-western section was due to the complexities of the local terrain and likely a lack of time and resources to deal with them appropriately.



The 'Dying Gaul'; a Roman marble copy of one of the statues that celebrated the defeat of the Galatians (eastern Celts) in the city of Pergamon in Asia Minor. The cost of Caesar's ambition to the tribes of Gaul had indeed been steep, with Plutarch observing that 'although it was not full ten years that he waged war in Gaul, he took by storm more than eight hundred cities, subdued three hundred nations, and fought pitched battles at different times with three million men, of whom he slew one million in hand to hand fighting and took as many more prisoners' (Plutarch, *LoC* 15). Even accounting for a degree of exaggeration in Plutarch's figures, the picture he paints was not far from reality. There was only one serious rebellion to Rome's rule in the following decade, by the Bellovaci in 46 BC; Gaul had been thoroughly 'pacified'.
(Rabax63/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 4.0**)

The Gallic relief army was numerous enough to have invested Caesar's position, laying siege to the besiegers, but it is unlikely that they had either the logistical system needed to outlast the Romans, or the engineering capability to force a major breach in the Roman defences. The Gauls were not unaware of tactics to assault fortifications, as evinced by their use of grappling hooks, scaling ladders, portable mantlets, fascines to fill in ditches, and their employment of a *testudo* formation to approach the outer walls in the final attack. All their tactics were predicated on a quick assault, however; they had no methodology for investing and systematically reducing a defender's fortifications in the Roman fashion. If the Gallic relief army had instead opted to blockade Caesar, the outcome might have been rather grim for the Romans, forcing them to break out or starve. While it might have been possible to source the supplies needed to sustain the relieving army, Vercingetorix and his compatriots in Alesia would have been weakened to

the point of uselessness. In addition, it was hardly within the martial character of the Gauls to have their enemy laid out before them, and then just wait for time to win their glory for them. So it was that they gave Caesar the decisive battle he needed.

Aftermath

There were still minor campaigns in the two years after Alesia, but that defeat had more or less settled matters in Gaul. There would be future uprisings (in 46 BC, 44 BC, 30 BC, AD 21 and AD 69), but they were never a significant challenge to the wider authority of Rome; little more than echoes of Vercingetorix. For the next five centuries Gaul would remain a province of the Empire, settled and relatively peaceful in a way that Germania never was. The peoples of Gaul generally did rather well out of the arrangement, in part because their civilization was relatively advanced at the time of their conquest, enabling them to adapt to the Roman world more readily than some others, and also because, now ensconced behind Rome's frontiers, external threats were both less frequent and met by the full power of Rome. For the late Republic and the nascent Empire that replaced it, there was also much benefit that accrued from the taming of Gaul; aside from the vast commercial and tributary gains, a more or less stable frontier with Germania was created, and Rome's legions gained a vast new pool of manpower from which to recruit, Gallic horsemen and other auxiliaries becoming a well-established and reliable part of the Roman Army in the ensuing centuries.



A detail of a sculpted panel on the Triumphal Arch of Orange, so-called because of its location in the town of Orange in south-eastern France. Likely erected during the reign of the emperor Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), it was built to honour the achievements of the veterans of the Gallic Wars (58–50 BC), and thus is a near-contemporary rendering of the men who fought only a few decades earlier. The panel shows a cavalry engagement between Romans and Gauls and, despite the damage it has sustained over 20 centuries, still gives a good impression of the soldiers of both sides, and of their weapons and equipment. (Christophe

Meneboeuf/Wikimedia/**CC BY-SA 4.0**)



The Roman tombstone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, AD 43–63, at Colchester Museum. Marcus Favonius Facilis was a centurion who served in Legio XX (raised around or after 31 BC by Octavian, later Augustus), illustrated by his *gladius* slung from a baldric and worn on his left hip, and most obviously by the *vitis* (the thick vine staff that was synonymous with discipline and a centurion's authority) held in his right hand. Although dating from the period of Claudius's invasion of Britain, he is armed, armoured and clothed in much the same way as his predecessors who served with Caesar. (CM Dixon/Print Collector/Getty Images)



A Roman marble reproduction of a Gallic warrior plunging his sword into his body in a last act of defiance, copied from a bronze original at Pergamon in Asia Minor. Loss in battle, especially for a war leader, was a disgrace that often ended in suicide, with examples including Brennus fleeing from Delphi after his defeat in 278 BC and Sacrovir of the Aedui after his failed rebellion in Gaul in AD 21. In Celtic culture battle was a means of creating and enhancing warrior prowess; it was a public event in which achievement could be seen, judged, and remembered. As such, any failure was subject to the same scrutiny, bringing disgrace upon the warrior who had suffered it; in such a circumstance taking one's own life was seen as the honourable solution. (Cunliffe 2018: 229–30). (Araldo de Luca/Corbis via Getty Images)

The wars were a personal, financial and political triumph for Caesar. His victories allowed him first to pay off the enormous debts he had accrued in gaining the proconsulships over Illyricum, Gallia Cisalpina and Gallia Transalpina; he eventually became so rich from his conquests that the Roman currency itself was devalued, so outrageous were the amounts of gold flowing back from Gaul. Militarily, his eight years of campaigning resulted in the formation a hugely effective battle-tested army that was loyal to him personally, as opposed to Rome – an important factor in his decision to cross

the Rubicon, and a valuable weapon in the coming turbulence. His political capital was equally strong at the war's end, but the vast power he had accrued to himself further destabilized the socio-political system of the Republic, leading to a bloody civil war from 49 to 46 BC in which two great factions, led by Caesar and his old rival Pompey, wrestled for supremacy. Caesar's victory and his subsequent appointment as dictator for life set the seal on his crowning ambition, but such unequalled triumph fanned the flames of those who thought so much power in the hands of one man was unconscionable. Caesar's outstandingly successful career ended on the Ides of March in 44 BC, surrounded by old enemies and erstwhile friends who cut him down at the height of his glory.

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Cassius Dio (c.AD 164–after 229) was a distinguished Greek senator and author of an 80-volume history of Rome, from the city's founding until AD 229. Some parts are fully extant, but much of the work is lost; an intermittently valuable abridgement of his text by the Byzantine historian Johannes Zonaras helps to fill some of the gaps. Written in Attic Greek, Dio's *Roman History* is something of a Graeco-Roman hybrid, and while most of the sources he used in composing his work are uncertain, his interpretations seem to be of his own making rather than rote repetitions of other men's views. He could be slapdash and error-prone, and also had a proclivity for supernatural events, paying much attention to portents and their interpretations (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 299–300).

Diodorus Siculus (fl.60–30 BC) was the author of the *Bibliotheca Historica*, a 40-volume universal history from the earliest times to 60 BC, of which 15 volumes and a number of fragments still exist. Writing from a Greek perspective, the *Bibliotheca Historica* drew on the works of a number of other ancient writers and historians such as Posidonius and Polybius (both of whom had things to say about the Celts), though it has proved enduringly difficult to assign sources to the entirety of his work; in some cases the original texts have been lost entirely, or may have (in the case of the later books) been taken from more contemporary reports or have been Diodorus's own original work. His ethnography of the Gauls (Book 5) likely relied on Posidonius and was written after the success of Caesar's war, a man whom Diodorus idolized and referred to as a 'God' on four separate occasions in his work. Thus some of his characterizations (such as cannibalism – 5.32.3) may be exaggerated to further justify the civilizing influence that Caesar would bring to the wild tribes beyond the border. Even so, his descriptions are vivid and not inconsistent with other sources and some archaeological evidence.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c.60 BC–after 7 BC) was a Greek critic, historian and teacher of Rhetoric who lived in Rome during the Principate. His major work, *Rhōmaïke Arkhaiologia* (Roman Antiquities), recounted the

founding of Rome down to the First Punic War (264–241 BC) and was first published around 7 BC. It was composed of 20 volumes of which the first 11 survive, with fragments of the remaining nine also extant. Dionysius paid Rome the compliment of treating it like a Greek city, celebrating its virtues in often tiring rhetorical form (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 478). His view of the Gauls is found in the existing fragments of Book 14, including his account of their sack of Rome in 390 BC, followed by their expulsion at the hands of Marcus Furius Camillus. Despite his Roman bias, and though the speeches of historical figures must be treated with great circumspection, Dionysius did carry out extensive research and draw on a wide range of sources in support of his narrative, also taking care to contextualize the events he recounted.

Gaius Julius Caesar's (100–44 BC) *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*

(Commentaries on the Gallic War) is by far the most important record of his campaigns in Gaul. Composed of eight volumes (seven written by Caesar and the eighth by Aulus Hirtius after Caesar's death), Caesar's volumes were dictated during or immediately after his campaigns as they were intended to give contemporaneous accounts of his progress to the febrile audiences in Rome. As such they can be expected to cast his actions in a positive light, with his attitudes to, dealings with, and description of the Gauls always determined by deep-rooted cultural prejudices and immediate political needs, and often by an expedient combination of the two (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 623). Despite the clarity of Caesar's language and his genuine skill in composing a compelling narrative, his work was produced for an audience who understood enough of military matters and campaigning that they didn't need every detail spelled out for them, something that is not necessarily the case for modern audiences. Nevertheless his account of his army's campaigns, sieges and battles is an outstanding first-hand record produced by the war's key participant.

The engineer and writer **Philon of Byzantium** (fl.c.200 BC) wrote a nine-volume compendium of technology on a range of subjects including mechanics, artillery, mathematics and siegecraft. The professional nature of his work suggests that his report on the properties of Celtic swords should be taken seriously. Gaius Plinius Secundus, usually known as **Pliny the Elder** (AD 23/24–79), was a prominent Roman of equestrian rank from Novum Comum in Gallia Cisalpina, and is primarily known as the author of the 37-book *Naturalis Historia*, an encyclopaedia that covered contemporary

knowledge of the natural world, including aspects of human culture and civilization. Prolific, widely travelled and industrious, Pliny's observations on Gaul occur in Books 1–2, and benefited from his first-hand experience of the province. He died while investigating the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 1197).

Plutarch (L. Mestrius Plutarchus, before AD 50–after 120) of Chaeronea was a philosopher and biographer who produced a prodigious body of work, much of which is lost, but his main achievement – the *Parallel Lives* – is mostly extant and is composed of a series of dual biographies (23 pairs remaining) intended to compare and contrast the moral character of its subjects. His other biographies included a *Life of Alexander* as well as *Life of Caesar*, the latter of which (together with Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*) is one of the main ancient sources concerning Caesar's life, career and death, drawing on Caesar's own work for some of its sections.

The *Histories* of **Polybius** (c.200–c.118 BC) covered the rise of Roman power from 264 BC down to the Third Punic War (149–146 BC) in 40 books, the first five of which have survived in their entirety, the remainder in fragments of varying sizes. A Greek soldier and aristocrat, he was shipped to Rome as a political detainee in 167 BC and found a place in Roman high society. Much of the value in his works, written in Greek, comes from the fact that he was aiming to explain to 'foreigners' (his erstwhile countrymen) what it was that made Rome and its armies so successful.

Posidonius (c.135–c.51 BC) was a Syrian-born Greek Stoic philosopher who embarked on long tours of research to the west, visiting certainly Spain, southern Gaul, Rome and Italy. He wrote on a large range of subjects including his 52-volume *Histories* which covered most of the cultures of the Mediterranean basin, including Gaul. (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 1231–1232). His detailed ethnography, often sourced at first hand, can be found repurposed in the works of writers like Diodorus Siculus, among others.

Sextus Julius Frontinus (c.AD 40–103) wrote a number of military handbooks, most notably the *Strategemata*, a task for which he was eminently qualified as he was also one of Rome's leading generals in the late 1st century AD, serving as Governor of Britain (AD 73/74–77) and proconsul of Asia (AD 86). In the three books of the *Strategemata* Frontinus discusses techniques of military command, using stratagems drawn mainly from past military leaders (though including several recent examples, particularly from

Domitian's campaigns in Germany), his overall aim being to provide practical guidance for contemporary commanders. The purpose of his work, coupled with his personal experience and active military career, make him an extremely valuable resource for the Roman Army in its early Imperial phase (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 785).

The Greek geographer and historian **Strabo** (64/63 BC–c.AD 24) composed his major work, the *Geographica*, at the close of the 1st century BC (it was first published c.7 BC with at least one further edition coming out no later than AD 23); it consisted of 17 volumes, Book IV of which concerned the peoples of Gaul. He lived in Asia Minor but was widely travelled, including a period of study in Rome and a five-year sojourn in Alexandria, giving him first-hand experience of many of the subjects and regions about which he wrote. Strabo is one of the most important sources of the Roman world, from the fall of the Republic through to the rise of the Emperors in the first decades of the 1st century AD.

Vegetius (Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, c.late 4th century AD) was the author of two works, the *Epitoma rei militaris* (commonly known as *De re militari* – On Military Matters), which is the only complete account of Roman military practice to have survived intact, and the *Digesta Artis Mulomedicinae*, a guide to the veterinary science of his day. *De re militari* is composed of four books: Book 1, the recruit; Book 2, army organization; Book 3, strategy and tactics; and Book 4, fortifications and naval warfare. Little is known about Vegetius himself, except that he was an administrator rather than a soldier or historian. He drew on many historical accounts and sources (including writers such as Frontinus) for his work, but without adequate differentiation or the sort of classification that would allow modern scholars to see how the Roman Army developed over time. Nevertheless his account is valuable as relatively little else remains of the written record (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 1584).

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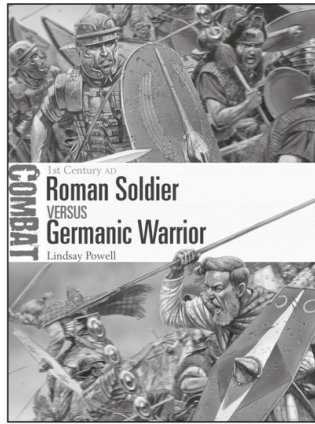
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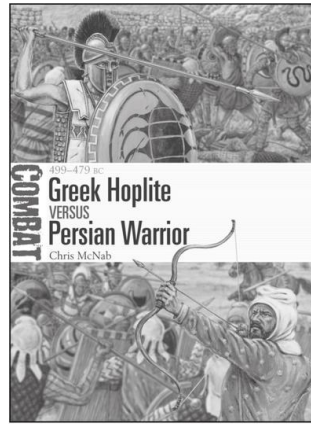
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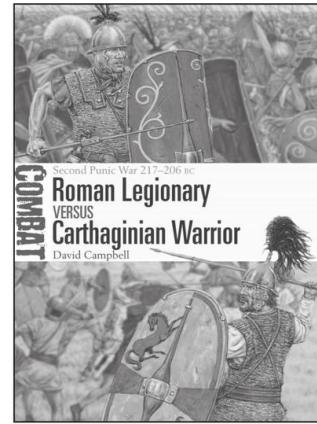
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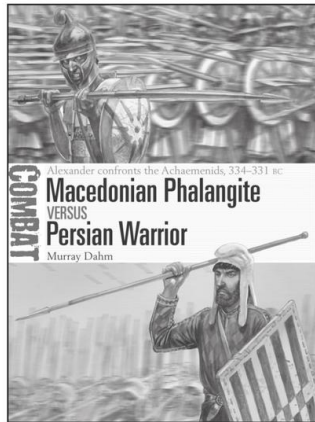
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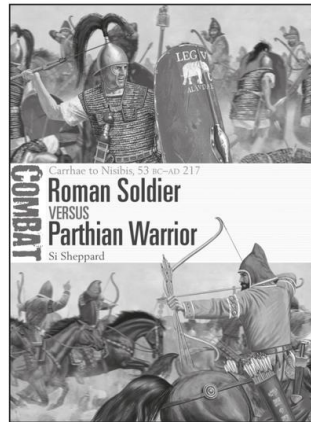
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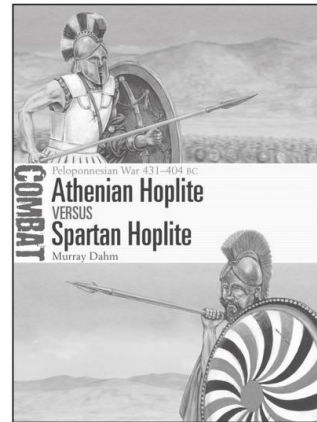
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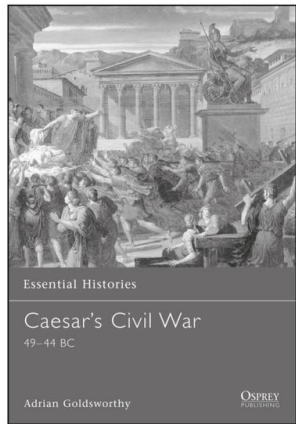


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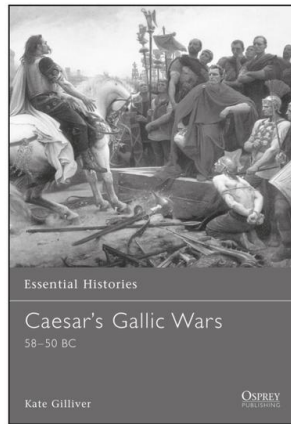


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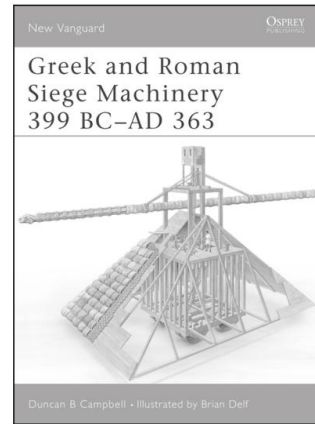
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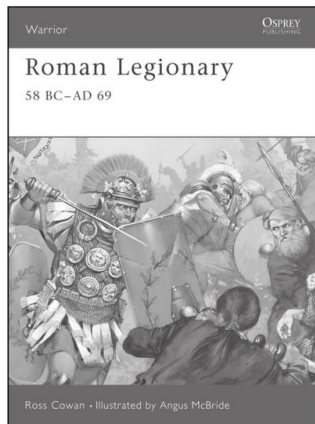
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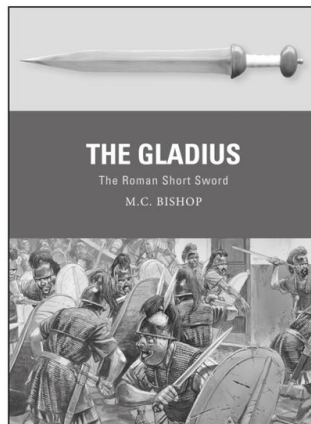
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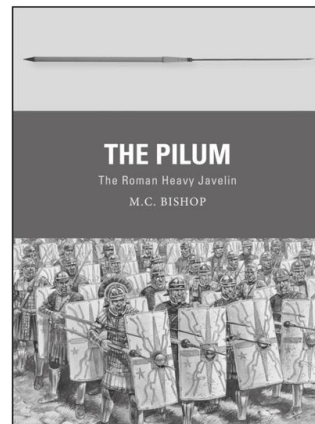
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Editor's note

When distances are given in miles, these are always Roman miles: 1 Roman mile = 1.48km. Dates are given in the Julian calendar (also known as the solar year), rather than the pre-45 BC Roman civil calendar (which was based on the lunar year). Specific dates are taken from the essay 'The Chronology of Caesar's Campaigns' by Kurt A. Raaflaub and John T. Ramsey, available for free online at <http://thelandmarkcaesar.com/>

Artist's note

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